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SPICY WESTERN
RANGE LAW
by Stewart Gates

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National Radio Institute
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SPICY WESTERN STORIES

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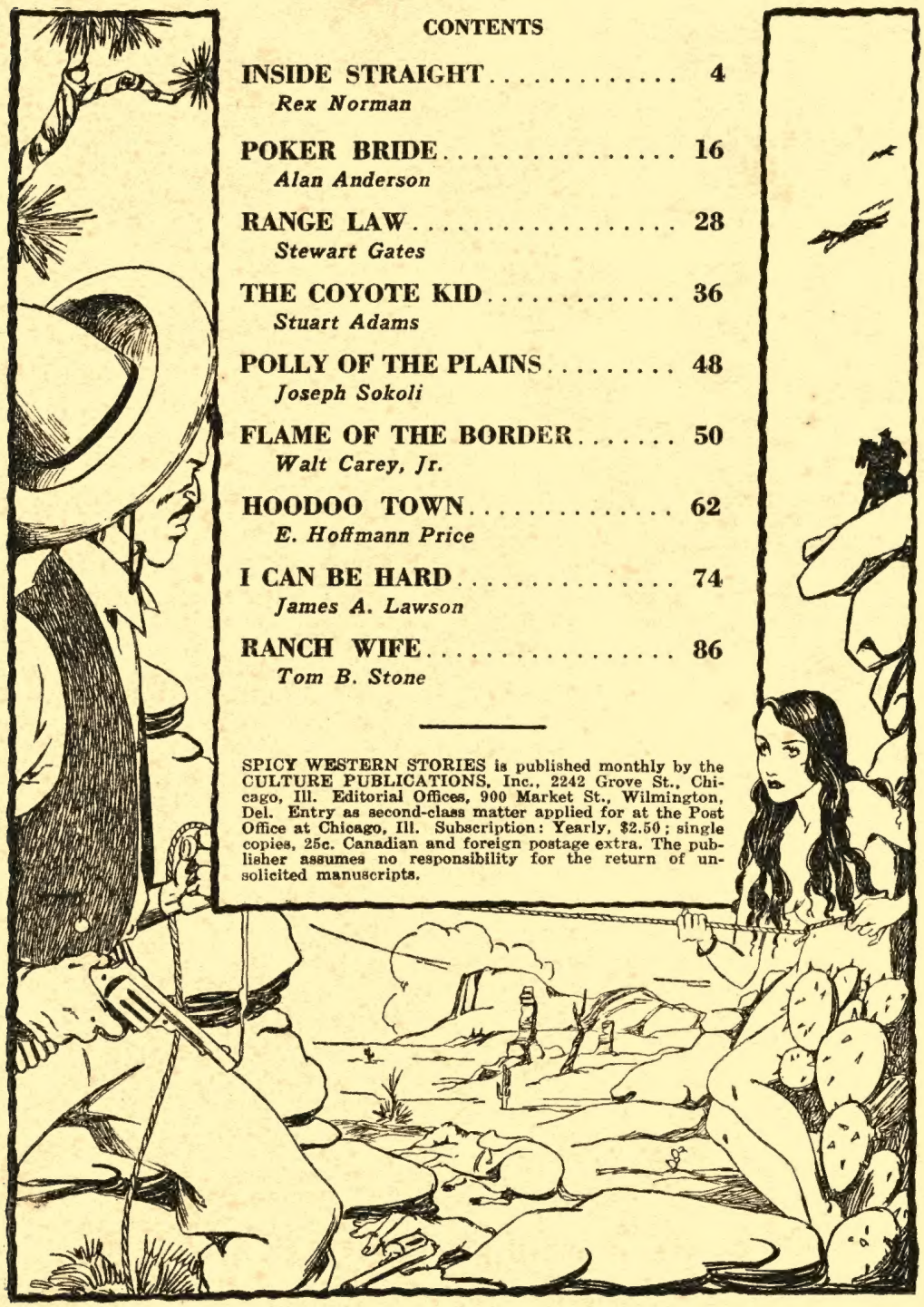

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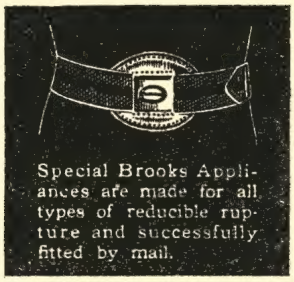

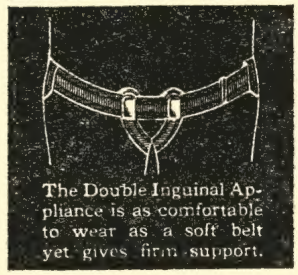

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BY REX NORMAN

INSIDE

There were five shots in Chuck's gun and five men he had to kill! His own life and the life and honor of a girl were at stake!

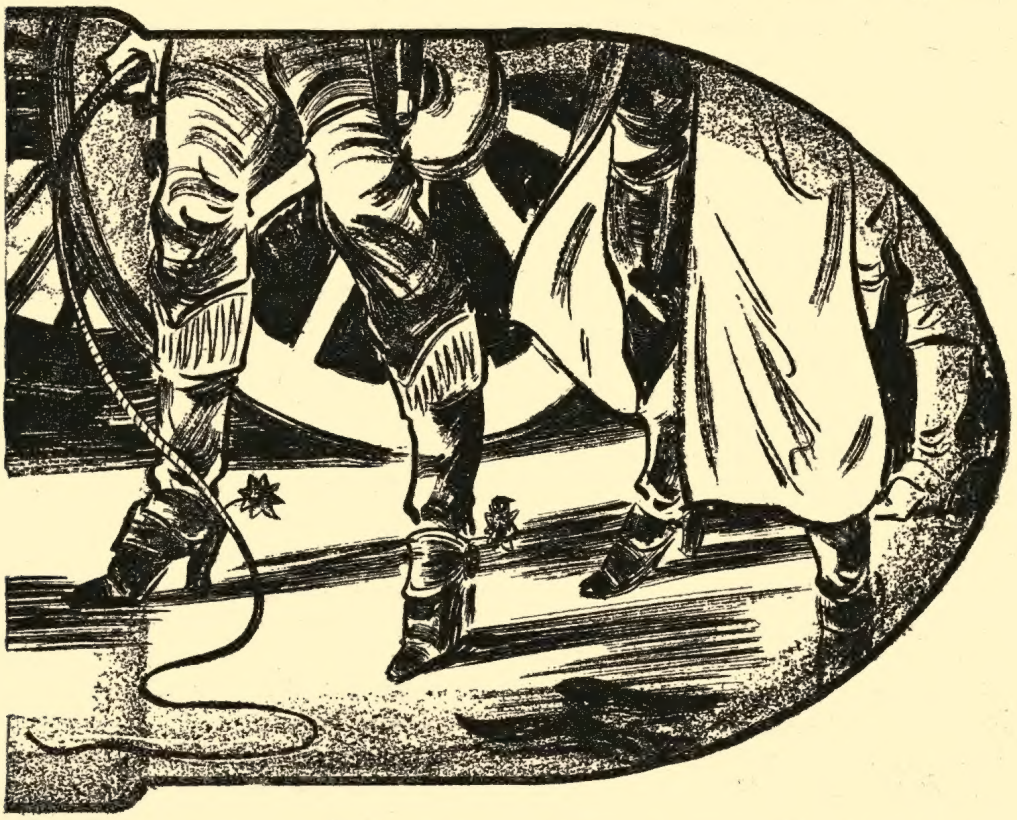
The leather quirt coiled and hissed around her as the man struck.

CHUCK DALE reined in his pinto. The ground sloped up ahead of him, then dropped steeply down into Wagon Wheel Gulch. He could not see the gulch from where he sat on his lathered horse but he knew every bend and turn in it. He fished the letter out from under his shirt and looked at it again. It was addressed to the Lonely Hearts Club, in Omaha.

Chuck flushed slightly. If any of his rannies got wind of this he'd get a plenty tough riding, but after all, here he was

STRAIGHT

with a good ranch and some money in the bank . . . and a man does get lonesome sometimes. Of course, there were always the boys down at the bunk house to play poker with, but somehow. . . . Chuck shook his head. Having a wife around would be a little different. He clipped the horse with his knees and the cayuse started forward. He'd do what he'd planned to do, give the letter to Ed Parker, the stage driver, to mail for him in town. Then, when. . . .



THE shots blazed out as suddenly as the strike of a trampled rattler. First a single bang, then three following it closely. Startled, Chuck reined in and the pinto reared, fighting his bit. The shots had come from the gulch ahead! And that was where the road that the stage followed into town lay!

Slipping out of the saddle with lightning speed, Chuck ran forward and threw himself on his face at the gully's edge. If there was someone messing around with a shooting iron down at the bottom of the gulch, there'd be no target easier to hit than a man on horseback silhouetted against the sky.

Quickly Chuck wormed his way forward and peered over the sharp drop into the gully below, then his eyes widened and a savage curse ripped from his lips.

There, almost directly below him, was the stage. A man stood at the heads of the two horses that pulled it, a rifle in the crook of his arm.

Four other men stood at the far side

of the stage with six-guns in their hands, and between them and the stage itself lay two things which were the key to the whole picture; the metal-bound dispatch box in which gold dust and valuables were carried . . . and the body of Ed Parker! It was a hold-up! The bandits had coolly stopped the stage when it slowed up at the top of Breakneck Hill and shot Ed Parker, the driver!

Chuck's hand had dived for his gun almost as soon as his eyes took in the scene below him; then he cursed again, this time at his own helplessness. His gun was not there! He had left it in its holster hanging from the elk horn over the ranch fireplace when he had slipped out to get his letter to the stage driver! His friend lay there in the dust below him and there was nothing he could do about it . . . and then a wild scream came from inside the coach itself! A woman's scream!

Chuck froze, waiting. The stage door banged open and a sixth man appeared, dragging a woman out after him. He was of medium height but with a tremendous spread of shoulders that bespoke great strength. His ten gallon hat fell off as he struggled to pull the woman out of the stage and Chuck saw that he had very black hair with an odd white streak running through it.

The woman was holding on to the edge of the door, her body tense. Then with an oath, the man exerted all his strength and broke her grip. Like a tigress she turned and threw herself at him, slashing at his face with her nails. Now that Chuck could see her more distinctly, he gasped.

She was young, beautiful, the prettiest little thing he had ever seen, either in the flesh or in pictures. Her red hair was hanging down her back, shaken loose by her struggles. The lovely curving lines of her body were vibrant with life as she fought with the man who held her.

"HELL cat, eh?" snarled the man. "I'll tame ya!" and with that he thrust her away from him with his left hand, shook out the quirt that dangled from his right wrist and struck her savagely. The leather coiled, hissing, around her young body, just below where her nubile breasts heaved under the silk of her dress. Her body jerked convulsively, her head snapped back, but she uttered no sound. The beast who looked like a man jerked the quirt away and it ripped the thin fabric of her dress, exposing creamy white skin, now marked with a red weal.

Again he struck, lower down, so that the lash cut around the swelling curve of her hips and in tearing her dress again, revealed the white roundness of beautifully tapered thighs. Again the man struck and again, his eyes gleaming with a hellish light at the pain he was inflicting. And as she jerked and trembled, more and more of her body was revealed to him with each stroke.

Chuck's nails were digging into the palms of his hands, he bit his lips until he could taste blood. He made a half movement to hurl himself over the edge of the gully and go for the fiend with his bare hands; then he checked himself. He could not afford to throw his life away like that, for his work lay clear before him.

There was one job and one job only he had to attend to, if it took the rest of his life; the job of getting every one of those six men there, the men who had killed his friend, were maltreating a woman and were about to make off with the dispatch box of the stage!

Now the woman below him was wavering on her feet, her dress hanging

in ragged strips from the lovely body which was more than half exposed. Then with a moan she pitched forward on her face and lay still. The man with the streak in his hair dropped his arm and stepped back.

"That's the only way to handle a woman or a horse," he observed. "Savage 'em till they know who's boss." He turned to the other men. "All right, boys," he said. "Bring up the ponies and let's be moving."

Four of the men started walking up the gully towards the big rock where their horses had been hobbled. One lingered.

"What about her, Streak?" he asked, pointing to the woman who still lay where she had fallen, her half nude body twitching even in her unconsciousness. "After all, she seen us enough to recognize us again. We can't leave her here. She'd have a posse out in no time." He pulled out his six-gun and cocked it. "Shall I. . . ?"

"Put it away, Lobo," answered Streak. "We won't leave her here. Seein' she's as pretty as she is, who'd want to? I don't know about you boys, but I get kinda lonesome up there in the hills at night." He stopped and picked the girl up in his arms. "She's comin' with us."

Chuck watched with narrowed, red-hazed eyes as the six men mounted and started to move off. That complicated things. Now it was not only a question of settling his score with them in hot lead but also a matter of rescuing the girl.

Quickly he discarded his previous plan of going back to the ranch and picking up his boys. Before he could get them and come back, the trail would be cold. They would be able to track the six men to their lair, of course, but it might take them days and by that time—what would have happened to the girl?

Chuck's hand dropped to the holster which wasn't there, and again he cursed under his breath. No. He had to follow them himself, immediately, and see what he could work out. He'd have to play a lone hand . . . and play it unarmed!

CHUCK shifted his body slightly, stretching his tired muscles, then peered out from behind the rock again. It was getting harder to see into the little valley now that the sun was setting, but he could still make out the black masses of the two cabins. His stomach was turning itself inside out with hunger.

He had been on the trail of the six bandits all day, tracking them here to their lair in a hidden valley of the Bad Medicine Hills, and he hadn't had a bite to eat in all that time. Well, it would soon be time for him to make his play. He didn't know exactly what it was to be yet but he knew he had to try. He grinned wryly. His play would be from the inside . . . and he had always been lucky at filling inside straights. Then suddenly he tensed, every muscle in his body knotting up for action.

The door of the larger cabin opened and the man they called Streak came out. He carried a tin cup in one hand and a plate of food in the other. He walked towards the smaller cabin where Chuck had seen him lock in the girl when they had arrived at the valley about an hour before. He opened the door and went in, shutting it behind him.

Chuck rose to his feet and walked towards his horse. He had to act now, whether he was ready or not. Streak was bringing the girl her supper, but after she ate it, or even before—! Chuck's mouth was straight as a sword slash as he mounted and started his horse down the steep path that led into the valley.

He was about halfway down, his eyes fixed on the smaller log cabin whose windows now gleamed with the light of a lamp, his ears listening for the girl's scream, when he remembered that he had a part to play. Rolling back in his saddle, he lifted his not untuneful voice in the song about Leadbelly Lil. He had just about finished the first verse when the door of the larger cacbin burst open and three of the bandits leaped out, six-guns in their hands. By some sixth sense, Chuck knew that the other two men in the large cabin were peering at him over the leveled sights of Winchester carbins. He waved a careless hand.

"Hi, amigos," he called. "Any chance of gettin' a mite of grub with you-all?"

THE men did not answer immediately but glowered at him with silent menace, the swarthy Mexican that Streak had called Lobo standing a little in front of the others. Chuck stole a quick glimpse through the lit windows of the smaller cabin and ground his teeth together. There was Streak, the girl struggling in his arms, her half-bared breasts crushed against him by his beastlike grip. He was glaring out the window at Chuck. Then, even as Chuck watched, he threw the girl away from him and, running to the window, drew a piece of sacking across it like a curtain. A second later he appeared outside the door and Chuck heard a metallic click as he locked it.

"Come along down here!" he growled to Chuck. "And keep them hands idle. We ain't partial to strangers much, not till we get to know sump'n about 'em."

"Sho," drawled Chuck calmly. "I kin understand that." And he rode down to where the men stood and slipped off his horse.

The men looked at him coldly for a moment, then Lobo nudged Streak.

"Hell!" he said. "He ain't even got a six-gun on him!" Then stepping forward, he felt deftly under both of Chuck's arms to see if he carried a weapon in a shoulder holster. "Nary a one," he said.

Streak relaxed a trifle, but his eyes never left Chuck's face.

"My name's Streak Scanlon," he said. "What's your's?"

"Chuck Dale," answered Chuck, feeling sure that none of the men had heard of him. Not one of them batted an eye.

"What might you be doin' around these parts?" asked Streak. Chuck shrugged.

"Driftin' around," he said. "Lookin' for a job. Do you need a good cowhand by any chance?"

Lobo stepped close to him.

"Always travel that way?" he asked. "Without'n a shootin' iron?"

Chuck looked back into his beady black eyes calmly.

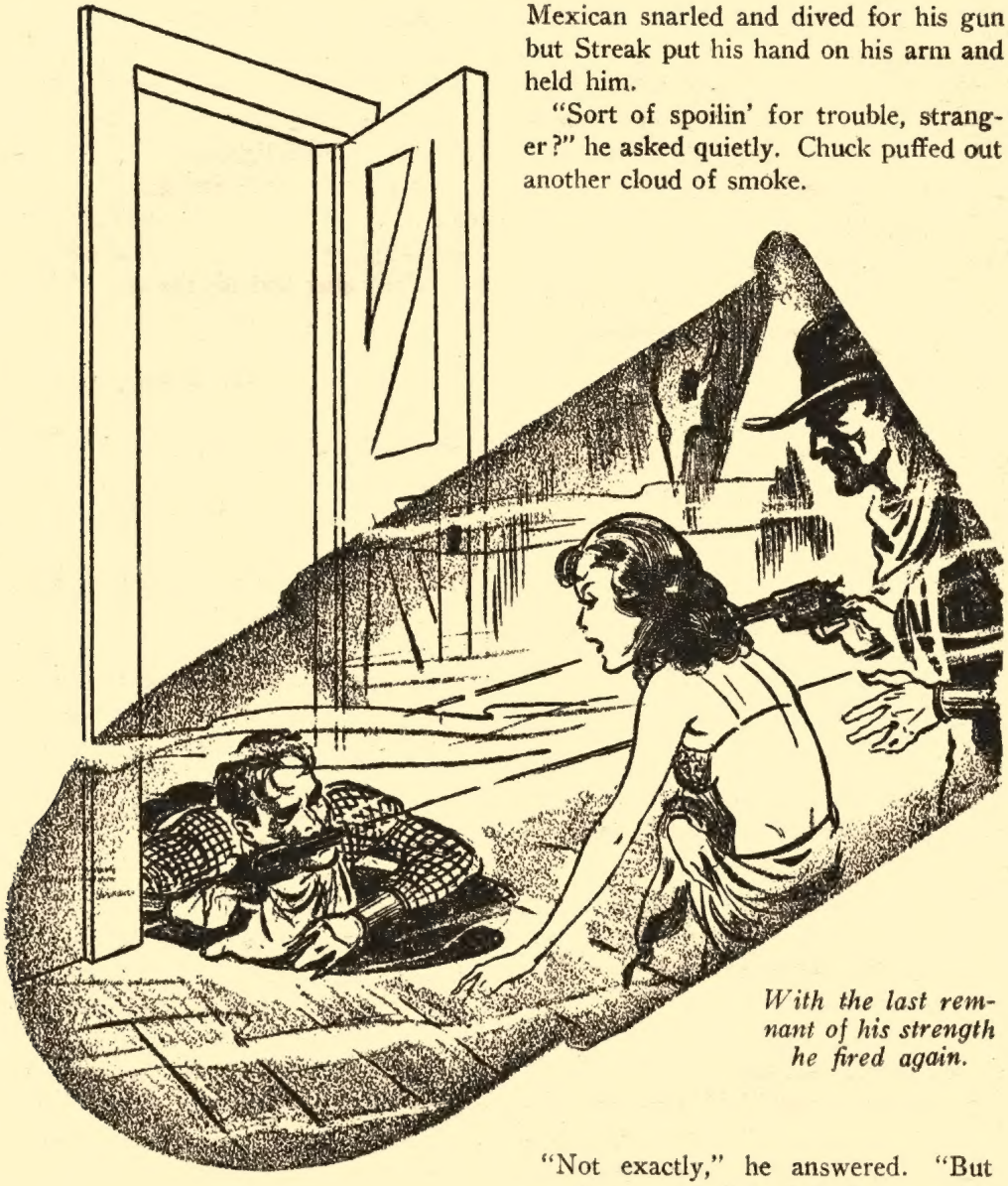
"Not always," he admitted. "As a matter of fact, I feel kinda lost without one. But I had to leave the last place I was at sorta in a hurry. So much of a hurry that I even forget my gun."

A strange light was beginning to burn in Lobo's eyes, a murdering light. The look of a man who delights in killing for any or no reason. He stepped back and raised his gun.

"Now that the formalities is over," he said over his shoulder to his chief, "How about lettin' him have it?" And he stood there ready—no, anxious—to shoot Chuck down in cold blood!

"Put it away, Lobo!" ordered Streak curtly. "If there's any shootin' to be done around here, I'll say when."

A look of disappointment came into Lobo's eyes as he slowly lowered his gun. He glared after Chuck as he entered the cabin and sat down at the table in response to Streak's invitation.



With the last remnant of his strength he fired again.

BEANS, meat and coffee were put before Chuck and he ate ravenously. The six men sat around him silently, not one of them saying a word, watching his every move as if waiting for him to give himself away. Finally he finished, leaned back and rolled himself a cigarette. He lit it and calmly puffed a cloud of smoke into Lobo's face as he sat glowering at him from across the table. The Mexican snarled and dived for his gun but Streak put his hand on his arm and held him.

"Sort of spoilin' for trouble, stranger?" he asked quietly. Chuck puffed out another cloud of smoke.

"Not exactly," he answered. "But now that my belly's full, I guess it's about time for a showdown, isn't it?" He leaned forward, his story and his line of action now clear in his mind. "I'm layin' my cards on the table," he said evenly. "My name's Chuck Dale all right, but what I didn't tell you was that the place I left in such an all-fired hurry that I couldn't take my gun with me, was the town calaboose."

"Yeah?" sneered Lobo. "What was

you there for? Snitchin' some kid's all-day sucker?"

"No, Rat Eyes," answered Chuck insultingly. "For pluggin' a guy whose face I liked more than I do yours!"

Again the Mexican, with a snarl, tried to get his gun, but Streak still held him with an iron grip.

"Go on," he said, his voice still cold.

"Well, they was aimin' to hold a little necktie party," continued Chuck. "And, bein' the principal guest, in a manner of speakin', I felt it'd be healthier for me not to attend. I busted out of the calaboose this mornin', took the sheriff's horse, and here I am. I don't know what you boys do around here, but somehow I got the feeling that you don't care for star badges any more than I do. If you can use one of the best shots around these parts, I'm your man."

"Think you're good, eh?" asked Streak. His eyes were still cold as ice, never leaving Chuck's face, but somehow he seemed more relaxed, as if he found the story plausible.

"Think?" drawled Chuck. "There's only one way to show you I don't only think it. Will one of you gents just loan me a gun for a minute?"

A moment longer Streak studied Chuck's face, then he took his own gun out of its holster and laid it on the table.

"Watch him, boys," he said. The other men took out their guns and held them ready as Chuck picked up Streak's Colt, broke it and took out two of the six bullets. Walking across the room he laid the bullets on the window sill, the lead pointing out and towards the window. Then he crossed the room to the opposite wall, some fifteen or twenty feet away. The six men watched him curiously. He stood with his back to the window and the bullets.

"Ready?" he asked.

"I don't know for what," answered Streak, "But shoot."

"That's just what I'm plannin' to do," answered Chuck, still facing the wall, then whirling with lightning speed, seeming not even to pause and aim, he fired twice . . . and each of his shots made a double explosion that sounded almost as one! Each slug had hit the cap of one of the two bullets on the window sill across the room and set it off!

"How's that?" asked Chuck. "Kin I shoot?"

Slowly Streak nodded.

"You can shoot," he said. "And I'm inclined to think you're elected."

WITH a snarl, Lobo leaped to his feet. "Yeah?" he spat. "Well, let me tell you somethin', Shootin' at targets is one thing, but shootin' at a man who's shootin' at you's another! I don't like his face, see? And if he's elected it's over my dead body." And then without warning, he played for his gun with the speed of a striking rattler!

Calmly Chuck waited. Cold murder was in his heart. This was one of the men he had made a silent vow to get for killing his friend.

The Mexican's gun was clear of its holster now, the barrel snapping up into line, and then just as his finger was closing on the trigger, Chuck thumbed off his shot. The Mexican's shot followed his by a split second but the slug was wide. Lobo stood there a moment, a surprised look on his face, a crimson stain spreading over his chest, then he pitched forward on his face and lay still.

"One," said Chuck to himself. "Five to go."

Without a word, he handed the gun back to Streak.

"Thanks," he said. "Am I still elected?"

Streak nodded. "You're still elected.

Lobo was gettin' a little hard to handle anyway. Do you want to drag him outside? We'll talk when you come back."

"Sure," said Chuck and picking up the Mexican by the heels, he dragged him outside the door and dropped him about twenty feet away from the house. He knew that Streak had sent him out of the cabin in order to confer with the other men; but he did not know about what. Stealing a quick look around, he took Lobo's gun out of his stiffening fingers and thrust it inside his belt, under his shirt. The odds were evening up. Now they were five to one . . . and at last he had a gun!

When he got back inside the cabin, Streak grinned crookedly at him. "Well," he said, "Since you're one of the boys now, I might as well tell you we've got a visitor stayin' down at the other cabin. A visitor what needs watchin'." He was studying Chuck's face closely. "A woman!"

Chuck didn't bat an eye.

"Holding her for ransom?" he asked.

"Somethin' like that," answered Streak. He rose to his feet. "Come on," he said going to the door and opening it. "I'm gonna let you take the first spell at watchin' her."

As he led the way to the other cabin, his plan became clear to Chuck. He, Chuck, was to think he was alone with the girl, but in reality Streak and perhaps some of the other men would be watching through cracks and knot holes in the walls. If he gave himself away in talking to the girl, if she gained his sympathy in any way and he showed weakness, his end would be swift and sure. A bullet through the window.

Chuck grinned to himself. Streak was taking no chances. He was playing it safe all the way.

Streak unlatched the cabin door and motioned Chuck in. "We're going to get some shut-eye," he said. "We'll spell you in about two hours." Then he moved close to Chuck. "And keep your hands off!" he gritted. "If anyone gets her, *I* do! See?" Then nodding curtly, he left, shutting the door behind him.

CHUCK looked about the inside of the cabin coolly. The girl was sitting on the low bunk opposite him, glaring at him, her brows drawn together in a frown. Her dress was in shreds as a result of Streak's first merciless lashing and later savage attack. Through the rents in the fabric Chuck could see the white of her body and the red of the weals that criss-crossed it. Her young rounded breasts were heaving and she was covering them with her hands, the dress too badly torn to keep them effectively concealed.

Even now, knowing that both his life and hers hung in the balance, staked against his coolness, Chuck could not help the throbbing in his temples, the dry taste that came into his mouth as he studied her half exposed beauty.

"I haven't seen you before," said the girl finally. "Are you another of those murderers?"

"I guess so, ma'am," answered Chuck and he started to roll a cigarette to keep his eyes and mind busy, off the dangerous lure of her loveliness.

"Somehow . . . somehow you don't look as bad as the others," said the girl. "My name's Lisa Conway. What's yours?"

"Chuck Dale," answered Chuck, lighting the cigarette and still keeping his eyes averted from hers. Even though he was not looking, nevertheless, he knew that she had slipped off the bunk and was coming across the cabin towards him.

His breath was starting to come faster in his nostrils, but he steadied himself to maintain his self-control. A soft hand

touched his arm and he felt the pressure of warm flesh against his knee. He looked down and she was kneeling next to him, gazing up into his face. The one breast that her hand had been covering swelled in satin-skinned, rounded firmness from the fragments of her dress. There were red marks striping her shoulder, the signs of Streak's clutching hands.

"Won't you help me?" asked Lisa; her low voice betrayed by an unsteady tremor. "Help me to get away from here? I was kidnaped from the stage coach while I was on my way to my father's ranch in Metaxa."

Chuck, despite the throbbing in his temples, the burning desire he felt to crush her in his arms kept his face wooden, his voice flat.

"G'wan, beat it," he said. "If the chief heard what you was tryin' to do, he'd whale the daylights out of ya."

When he saw her eyes widen and fill with despair, it was all he could do to restrain himself. He knew that Streak and his men were watching, listening, through some chink in the wall, yet to speak like that to her. . . . He gritted his teeth.

He saw her face pale slightly, then a look of determination came over it. She rose to her feet and, seizing the torn fabric that partially concealed her white breasts, she ripped fiercely, shredding the material so that she was almost completely bare to the waist; the pale skin of her rounded thighs gleamed through the rents in her skirt.

She stood there for a moment, a faint flush mounting her cheeks as he felt his burning eyes sweeping over her.

"Do you like me?" she breathed, finally. "Enough to help me?" Then she had thrown herself on her knees before him again. "You see how he's treated me!" She touched the scratches on her fair skin. "When he comes back, he'll—oh! please—please help me escape! I'll do anything to pay you back . . . anything. . . !" Her warm fingers stole along his arm, tightened as she pulled herself up and stood very close to him, breathless.

CHUCK'S throat was dry, choked. He could not utter a sound, but she mistook his silence for refusal.

"Here . . . here is a sample," she said, and throwing her arms around his neck, she pressed her mouth to his. Her warm breasts were firm yet tenderly soft, pressed against his chest. Her whole body was quivering as she nestled in more tightly to him. Her mouth was eager and moist, and her breath mingled with his as her lips parted.

Almost unconsciously his arms went around her, feeling the satiny smoothness of her nearly bare back. With a sharp sigh, she pressed even closer to him. It was as if she had taken his touch to be a promise.

"Listen!" hissed Chuck in her ear. "I'll help you! I'm not one of the gang! Anything I do from now on is an act." She pulled away from him, her eyes wide, blazing with hope, then he had leaped to his feet and dragged her up after him.

"You little tart!" he growled aloud for the benefit of the listening men. "Try and camp me, eh?" He lifted a menacing hand. "I oughta give you a whaling you won't forget!"

But if Chuck was a good actor, Lisa was an even better one. She drew away from him. Then with an expression of tigerish rage on her face, leaped on him so fiercely that for a moment he thought she had not heard his whisper.

"Beat me? I'll tear your eyes out!" She hissed, and then was on him, clawing at his face and body, but not as

"I oughta give you a whaling you won't forget!" he muttered.

savagely as it would appear to someone else, seeming to bite him but actually pressing a burning kiss on his neck and whispering "Bless you!" under her breath.

She seemed to take delight in pressing and writhing her body against his while pretending to struggle furiously. Chuck was breathing hoarsely. It may have sounded like rage, but it was really the result of a searing emotion that he found almost uncontrollable. Finally, almost in self-defense, he picked her up in his arms, carried her across the room and threw her down on the bunk.

"Lie there, damn you!" he snarled. "Or I'll . . ." Then he heard the door

open behind him, and he whirled around. Streak stood there, his eyes burning oddly. He glanced briefly at Chuck, then his look fastened on Lisa and did not leave her again.

"All right, Chuck," he said. "I'll take over now. G'wan up to the other cabin and sleep there. I'll see you in the morning."

A moment Chuck hesitated. Streak's eyes glittered with eagerness. Every line of his face spoke of determination that would not be denied. Lisa had overplayed her hand. In her attempt to win Chuck's sympathy, she had aroused a beast in the secretly watching Streak, a beast whose brutality she had already felt.

Then Chuck looked to his right. The other boys stood there, eyes on him, hands swinging just over their gun butts. With an effort Chuck composed his face and made his voice sound flat and unemotional.

"Sure, Streak," he drawled. "I could use a little shut-eye myself. Besides, he jerked his head toward the now wide-eyed and trembling Lisa, "she's kinda hard to handle."

"I'll handle her," said Streak, still without taking his eyes from Lisa. "Don't worry none."

Chuck stole one more look at the cowering girl's face, a face that silently begged for aid yet feared a betrayal on his part. Then gritting his teeth at the necessity of waiting for a propitious moment to show his hand, he went out, shutting the door behind him and walking up the path to the larger cabin with the other men behind him.

ONCE inside the cabin he lay down on the bunk and unbuttoned his shirt. To the others it looked as if he were making himself comfortable for the night, actually he was making the concealed gun in his belt more accessible. Lobo had fired one shot from that gun. There were five left . . . and he had to get five men with those five shots! If he missed once, he was done for!

The four rannies sat down at the table in the middle of the room with evil grins on their faces. One of them took a greasy deck of cards from his pocket and rifled through them.

"Let's play a round of cold hands for her," he suggested.

Another one, a bowlegged, pock-marked puncher nodded.

"Good idee," he said. "Not that there's much use in it, though, with Streak around." He rose to his feet. "In the meantime, howsoever, let's give our ears a treat." He walked over and opened the cabin door. "I got a feelin' we're gonna hear some right fancy female yellin' in a minute or two."

Chuck's body was damp with icy sweat. A cold murderous rage filled him. A girl was in that other cabin, fighting with a fiend who was worse than inhuman, and these coyotes joked and laughed! He lay back, his eyes half closed, his hand resting on his bared and lean, muscle-ridged belly, a scant inch or two from the gun he had taken from the dead Lobo.

The three men sat at the table as the cards were dealt out. The fourth, a pock-marked one, still stood at the open door as if reluctant to leave, as if afraid he might miss something. And then it came, a shrill scream filled with fear, pain and rage!

The four men looked at one another with leering grins . . . and then Chuck snapped into action!

His hand dived down with lightning speed and when it came up, the gun was gripped in its sinewy fingers. His thumb fanning, he got off his first shot and his second. One slug blasted a surprised

look on the face of the bandit who was dealing the cards, the second caught the man opposite him and whirled him, kicking, off his chair and on the floor. Chuck's eyes were cold as ice, his hand steady as a rock.

He was playing his cards the only way he could, playing them not only for his own life but for the life and honor of a girl as well . . . and playing against men who had murdered his friend!

Now the third man at the table had recovered from his surprise and his gun was out. With a snarl, he fired; and his shot and Chuck's third boomed out together. Chuck felt the heat of the slug as it whizzed past his ear and buried itself in the wall behind him, but the man who had fired it would never crook a trigger finger again. He slumped forward on the table and lay still.

Chuck was off the bunk now and leaping for the door where the pock-marked rannie had been standing a moment before . . . and he was gone!

With an oath, Chuck went out the door anyway. It had only been a matter of seconds since Lisa's scream had pierced the night air but even so, Chuck was going down to the other cabin, regardless of the danger of ambush.

HIS LEAP carried him a full ten feet from the cabin door and he lit going down hill, hell bent for election. It must have been his speed that saved him, for the pock-marked puncher had had plenty of time to get set. When he fired from where he was lurking, around the corner of the cabin, Chuck was going away from him, leaning way forward. The slug hit him high in the left shoulder, tearing through the muscles with a stabbing pain. Chuck's stride broke, then he fell forward and rolled over twice, ending up face down.

The rannie leaped forward, exultation stamped on his face.

"It's all right, Streak!" he yelled. "I got the son. . ." And then Chuck's hand lifted and he fired his fourth shot. The pock-marked face twisted with amazement. The mouth closed, biting off the expletive in the middle; then the bow legs gave way and the dry-gulcher toppled backwards and stared at the moon with glassy eyes.

Chuck gritted his teeth and rose to his knees. His left arm dangled uselessly at his side. Taking his left hand in his right, he thrust it inside his belt to keep it out of his way. Then he was on his feet again and running towards the other cabin, running towards what was almost certain death . . . to face a killer forewarned by the previous shots and armed, while he, Chuck, had only one bullet left in the cylinder of his gun!

He threw himself flat against the wall of the cabin to one side of the door so that Streak could not fire at him through it or through the window. He leaned over and beat on the door with the muzzle of the smoking Colt.

"Come out, you murdering side-winder!" he challenged. "Come out and fight like a man!"

His only answer was a bullet that whizzed out through the door, humming past his head.

He grinned grimly, as if he had expected just that response, then he clutched at the rough bark of the cabin's log walls to keep himself on his feet. Hot blood was bathing his left side and he could feel his strength ebbing from him with its flow. He wavered a moment, then sank to his knees. Summoning all his strength so that no sign of weakness would show in his voice, he yelled:

(Continued on page 121)

POKER

One hand, draw poker, nothing wild—and the winner was to get the girl whom Nash loved better than anything in the world!

A YEAR and three months is a hell of a long time. For a year and three months Bert Nash hadn't seen a man. And it had been a year and a half since he'd laid eyes on a woman. That was a damned sight worse.

But it had been worth it. The pack horse carried ten thousand dollars in nuggets. And the dust in his money belt would assay five hundred dollars at least.

BRIDE

BY ALAN ANDERSON

The slug caught the girl squarely in the mouth.

He was going to blow every ounce of it. He'd soak in a hot bath. He'd get a much needed shave and a hair cut. Then he'd gorge himself on good food. Afterwards —well, he couldn't quite make up his mind. Liquor, probably . . . with perhaps a girl to help him drink it . . . .

The sprawling town in the distance would supply all his needs. His head spun airily. Five hundred dollars to blow on riotous living! Ten thousand to buy and stock a ranch of his own. He urged the buckskin to a brisker gait. The jogging pace of the pack horse filled the sun-drenched plain with the clatter of cooking utensils.

He entered the town. Suspicious eyes followed his progress. He sensed an electric tension in the air. It failed to disturb him. No one seemed primed for gun play. But it wouldn't have bothered him if they had. He could toss lead with the best of them.

Nash rode into the shadowy stable

and swung down. A crusty old man with tobacco-stained whiskers shuffled forward and took the horses.

"Howdy, stranger!" greeted the old man.

"Howdy, pop! What's ailing *hombres* hereabouts?"

"Danged'st thing yuh ever hear tell of. 'Morrow noon the boys is goin' ta gamble fur a female. Winner gits hitched up to her all legal. Hell, son, gents has been shootin' each other jest fur the pleasure a courtin' Sheila Richter nigh on three years."

Bert shoved back his sombrero and scratched his head. "Don't sound reasonable."

"We got a female bandit south a here. Name's Carlota. She nabs old man Richter an' holds him fur ransom. Ten thousand dollars. Sheila ain't got it, see?"

"So she'll marry the man who pays it?"

"Yep! Six gents offers it to her. Ain't none a them worth lookin' at twice. Ta save shootin' they'll play poker fur her. Sheila says one's as bad as the other."

"Must be a right handsome filly," observed Bert.

"Son, men has rid a hundred mile ta see Sheila Richter."

It was all very interesting and Bert Nash resolved to take a peek at Sheila Richter. But there were more pressing needs to fill. The gold was well concealed and he did not look prosperous enough to merit the interest of bandits or gamblers. So he put the pack in a corner of the buckskin's stall and made a bee line for the barber shop.

He had a shave and a hair cut. For an hour he soaked in a tub at the rear of the place. Then he put on clean clothes and made a dash for the hotel. He had a two inch thick steak and all the trimmings. Afterwards he devoured a platter of bacon and eggs and topped it off with a wedge of pie and his sixth cup of coffee. The waiter was properly impressed.

Feeling like a stuffed chicken, he crossed to the saloon. The bar was crowded but it was still too early for the dancehall girls. He smacked his lips as fiery liquor scorched his throat.

"I'm layin' two ta one Ferris Tyler wins," said someone. Nash frowned. In a poker game no man should deserve odds.

"Here comes Ferris now," said someone else.

NASH looked up. He saw a short, red headed man with a barrel-like chest and greedy, close-set eyes. A livid scar twisted his mouth in a cruel leer and made his ugly face appear lop-sided. Bert hated the man on sight. He did not cringe under the scrutiny of those close set eyes.

"Stranger here?" asked Tyler, his eyes taking in Nash's plain clothes.

"Yep! I've been riding hard and long. I aim to get drunk and have me some fun."

"Go to it!" said Tyler with a grin. Nash knew the reason for that appraisal. Tyler was judging whether or not he had ten thousand dollars to wager. He had it, but he'd not stake it by any manner of means. Not after the privation he'd suffered.

Bert Nash had a few drinks then sensibly returned to the stable and put half his dust in the saddle bags. In his present mood he could go through the dust in a couple of hours.

When he returned, his eyes spotted a dancehall girl seated alone at the end of the room. Mexican she was, young and very pleasingly curved. She wore a skirt, and a jacket held together with one button. It was so tight that it mashed her breasts inward and upward until the inner slopes pressed together and threat-

ened to escape the tight fabric. Bert sighed in rapture. He stared at the button. How easy . . . ! He sighed again.

He went over, sat beside her and said: *"Como le pasa?"*

"I am very well," she said with a red smile and eyed him with favor. Handsome strangers were rare in her life.

He bought her a drink. It was impossible to keep his eyes from the ripeness of her soft breasts. The appraisal was flattering. She laughed and said: "You like me, yes?"

"Muchisimo!" He used the superlative.

A Mexican boy sat down at the piano and began to play. The girl touched Nash's arm and asked: "I dance, yes?"

He nodded. She got up and those lush breasts passed within a foot of his eyes. The sight dazzled him. She began to dance. The skirt billowed and spun. Her legs were plump, yet rich in sweeping curves. The sleekness of her thighs and the full flare of her hips fired his blood. Her waist was slender and her breasts strained against the jacket. Faster and faster, she whirled. Finally the button gave way. The jacket opened. For a single turn his wide eyes caught a flash of ripe breasts, ivory smooth, swaying with the abandon of the dance. With a laugh she stopped and drew the jacket front together. She came over and sat down.

"The hotel," she suggested invitingly, "I think, is filled. But we have nice rooms, and if you decided to stay here. . . it might be nice, yes?" With that she stood up again. As by misadventure the jacket opened. Bert blinked. Then he got up so suddenly he knocked over his chair.

HE WAS in no mood to dicker. The room was fifty dollars. He paid it and received a key. He bounded up the stairs three at a time. When he reached the room, he slumped in a chair and used his sombrero as a fan.

The girl came in with two glasses and a bottle. Smiling she closed and bolted the door. The jacket button had been refastened. She wore a different skirt, though. It was thinner. Through it he saw the brownness of her legs.

She set the bottle and glasses on the table and came over to snuggle into his lap. The thin skirt slid up about the warm columns of her dusky-skinned thighs. She crossed one knee over the other, shifting her weight in his lap to do so, and smiled while he gazed at the gloss of dancing light along the bend of her knee. He kissed the hollow of her neck. She shivered and said: "You I like!" Her breathing quickened. Those swelling breasts strained against the jacket. His eyes stared, fascinated, at that lone button. It would never stand the stress. With a happy grin he seized her hands. As if awaiting his move, the button sailed across the room and struck a wine glass with a musical tinkle.

BERT NASH breakfasted on half a dozen fried eggs, potatoes, toast, and five cups of coffee. He felt like a frisky colt. Had he been a dog, he'd have gone out and howled or chased his tail.

He decided to go back to the saloon and get good and drunk. He left the hotel. It was there that he saw Sheila Richter, sitting in a buckboard in front of the saloon. He knew it was she because the woman he saw was precisely the type that would set men shooting, and bring others from a hundred miles just to see her beauty.

Her hair was a bright yellow, fine and glittering. Her eyes were as blue as the heavens above and her wide mouth naturally red. Her face was oval, her flesh clear and very white and her nose

straight. He saw that she wore a black silk shirt open at the throat. High, wide-set breasts were so conical and firm that twin wigwam-like protrusions formed in the black fabric. He knew that she was tall; knew that the rest of her body would surpass even the magnificence of her superb breasts.

In one second Bert loved her more than he'd ever loved anything in his life. Her beauty staggered him. He had to lean back against the hotel porch for support. His eyes were like saucers; his jaw hung agape. A moustached Mexican came from the saloon and spoke to her. Bert tugged out his watch. It lacked ten minutes of noon.

He never hesitated. He went to the stable and unrolled his pack. Then he flung the sacks of gold across his shoulder and went out. The saloon was packed. He wormed his way along the bar.

SIX players sat at a round table in the center of the room. Sheila Richter, dreadfully pale and nervous, sat there. He didn't blame her. They were an ugly lot. The moustached Mexican stood behind her chair.

Nash forced his way to the table and looked her in the eye.

"Mam," he said, "I've got the ante. Am I in?"

"Why . . . why yes," she stammered in reply, and, although choked, her voice was deep and melodious. Hope seemed to gleam in her blue eyes.

He glanced at Tyler. That individual was surprised but not alarmed. He said: "Take a chair, stranger!" He waved to an empty seat. Nash sat down. He was to the dealer's right and two seats away. The man on his left was obviously a gambler. There was another gambler, three ranchers, and Tyler. The dealer weighed Nash's gold. It was correct.

"Gents," said Tyler, "draw poker, nothing wild. Yuh kin draw four cards." He nodded to the Mexican. "Carlota's man'll take the winner's gold. When old man Richter gits back, Sheila'll marry the winner."

All nodded agreement. The skinny, rat-faced dealer ruffled the deck. The gambler to his right cut. The room became tensely silent. Nash's hands began to shake as the cards dropped. He lit a cigar. The others were studying their cards. Then he picked up his hand and slowly, one by one, separated the five cards.

An ace. Another ace. And another! Then a king. And another king! A full house—aces and kings. He began to sweat. He closed the hand.

"Cards?" the dealer asked the first player.

"One," said that man in a shaky voice. To a flush or full house at best, Bert decided. He glanced at the girl. She was very white and kept biting her lower lip.

The next man drew two cards. The next also two. It was Tyler's turn. With a leer, he stood pat. The gambler next to him drew three. It was Nash's turn.

He felt a hundred eyes upon him. His brain spun. From the first he suspected the game of being crooked. Tyler's confidence now convinced him. Then, he'd been dealt a full house on purpose and it would never stand. He was sure of that.

Very calmly he sorted out the two kings and tossed them face down on the table. Very clearly he heard the dealer suck in his breath. Tyler's eyes widened in amazement. The gambler next to Tyler shuffled his cards nervously. The dealer dealt the two cards. And from the top. He dared not do otherwise. Nash scooped them up but did not look. The

As she came near his hiding place, he dived, tackled her.

last player took a long time deciding. Finally he drew four.

Nash opened his hand. The three original aces. Then the nine of hearts. A chill raced down his spine. His heart skipped a beat, then thumped. He'd drawn the last ace!

One by one the hands went down. A flush. A straight. Three fives. Then Tyler's turn. Almost gloating he laid down four jacks. A murmur swept through the crowd. The man next to him put down another flush. It was Nash's turn. He spread out the four aces. Tyler turned a deep purple and seemed about to explode. The last man laid down his hand. He had a pair of threes!

The room filled with the chatter of excited voices. Carlota's henchman picked up Nash's gold and departed. Sheila got to her feet and faced Nash. Her face was expressionless.

"You will come home with me," she said. "When my father returns, we'll be married."

Like a man in a trance, Bert followed her to the street. A hundred envious eyes watched him as he helped her to the wagon and climbed up. He lifted the reins and clucked to the horses. They started out. Ahead, Carlota's messenger vanished over a hill.

She directed him. Nothing else was said. Sheila, thin-lipped, sat staring straight ahead. Nash felt like a fool. He wanted desperately to say something; to allay her misery. But he could think of nothing worth saying.

THE Richter *hacienda* was not far from town. It was a huge U shaped adobe building, the center enclosure being, after the Spanish fashion, a *patio* abounding in tenderly nursed flowers. It was a gracious, imposing household characterised by good taste.

A *peon* ran to the horses' heads. Nash climbed down and helped Sheila out. Her hand was cold. A number of Mexican and Indian servants were in the *patio*. Sheila faced them and said: "This is my husband-to-be, your new master. When father returns, we'll be married."

They bowed. Sheila entered the house. Nash followed and found himself in a spacious, well furnished living room. She turned to him.

"This is all very strange. We'll have to . . ." She broke off suddenly and threw herself on the divan. Burying her face in her arms, she cried as if heart would break. The buckskin skirt had crawled up over her knees to reveal amazingly white legs above her boot tops. They were long legs, slender, yet a series of perfect, heart stirring curves.

Nash glanced at her without passion. His heart was moved. He knew the hell of suspense she'd suffered; knew the loathsome prospect of marriage to a man like Tyler or the others. A disagreeable thought struck him. Why, he was no better than they! He'd taken advantage of circumstances.

"Ma'am," he blurted after a swift decision, "reckon everything is all right now. Your father'll be back soon. So I reckon I'll nosey along."

She sat up suddenly and stared at him with tear-brimmed eyes. Her expression was incredulous.

"But . . . but why did you gamble for me?"

His hands twisted his sombrero nervously. "Didn't want to see any of those other skunks win."

"But the money?"

"Shucks! I've got lots more."

She looked like an animal that had just escaped a trap and was tasting its first ecstasy of freedom.

"You are a gentleman," she said, and his heart warmed. "I tell you what we'll do. You stay until father returns. Then

he'll give you a note on our steers. They're prime beef."

"Why didn't the bank?" he asked in surprise.

"They're short of currency. Would have taken days to get it."

"And those dirty skunks wouldn't take your note!" he raged.

She smiled at him. "They're not like you. They're beasts. You . . . you're splendid. I'm going to kiss you."

She sprang to her feet and threw her arms about his neck. Her lips were blissfully warm and soft. They seemed to drain the strength from his body. Her vibrant young body was hard against him. Those firm breasts pressed solid and cool upon his chest; the full length of her supple form was pliant and yielding against his. It took all his will power to keep from seizing her. But he kept his arms at his sides while she kissed him. Finally she drew away flushed and radiant. She was so supremely happy that he was proud of his decision not to marry her.

"Pedro," she said, "will show you to your room. We'll have dinner in an hour."

HIS room was pleasantly cool. Nash paced the floor. A new and exciting prospect made inactivity impossible. If all other men were beasts in her eyes, he was not. He'd acted like a gentleman. Then he'd be free to court her in the ordinary way.

He stepped out on the balcony. It was dusk. There was a faint breeze that soothed his fevered brow, as he walked toward the end of the building. Just as he passed a door, the breeze swung it slowly open. He glanced into the room, then froze in his tracks. A queer paralysis made movement impossible. There was a contracting tightness at his throat; a peculiar roaring in his ears.

Sheila Richter was dressing for dinner and had just put on her first garment—a wispy trifle of black lace that hugged her hips. Otherwise she was gloriously unclad. That mass of fine yellow hair, however, partly concealed her breasts.

Yet the movements of her body as she picked up and examined fragile, gossamer stockings, caused a milky and taut-skinned mound to force its way through the shielding tresses and expose its proud perfection.

Spellbound, Bert stared as she sat in a chair and began to draw the stockings, one by one over her small feet. He'd never dreamed that skin could be so satiny and creamy or that legs could be so long and slender and yet be alluringly full curved. The round sweep of her hips and the perfect taper of her thighs set his heart to pounding. She stood up, turned again to the bed, and her back glistened whitely in the yellow light. Her shoulders were firm and well set but her waist was narrow. He watched her pick up a black silk gown and slip it over her head. Inch by inch those fascinating charms vanished. He tip-toed away.

The dinner was perfect. Sheila was gay, beautiful and radiant. She liked him, that he knew. He recalled the good manners his dead mother had taught him as a child and applied them to advantage. He wished terribly that he could live here forever. That she could love and marry him.

THREE perfect days passed. On the third Sheila became worried. She explained: "Carlota's only one hard day's ride south of here. Dad should be here by now."

But Dan Richter failed to make an appearance. On the fifth day Ferris

Tyler and the other losers came to the *hacienda.* He came to the point.

"Carlota wants another ten thousand. Reckon we'll have to play that game over, eh boys?" He leered at Nash. Sheila paled. The carefree happiness had long since fled. Heavy-hearted, Nash knew that Tyler had won his point. Sheila would make any sacrifice to regain her father. The men rode off. Sheila was the picture of misery. Hanging her head in defeat, she walked slowly back to the house.

Bert's heart was moved to compassion, then rage. His smiling mouth set in a straight, unyielding line and his eyes became icy and glittered with a hatred some men had seen before they died.

He went to his room and buckled on his forty-fives. Then he tip-toed to the *patio,* now shadowy in the slanting rays of the setting sun. He found a servant. "Tell Miss Richter I'm riding south to have a pow-wow with Carlota. But don't tell her until I'm gone, or I'll beat you to a pulp."

The man's eyes widened in alarm. Nash went out to the corral and caught a huge, wide-chested black. He saddled and bridled him hurriedly and swung up. Away he went as if the devil pursued him.

South—due south. The black was fast and of amazing endurance. All night he rode. At dawn he found himself in a series of north and south ridges. Just where to find Carlota was a mystery. But with so many riders under her command he stood a good chance of meeting one.

Instead, he encountered four of them. He had been riding down a twisting arroyo and was atop them before he knew it. Forewarned, pistols covered him. He stopped and raised his hands. Inwardly he cursed his hurry. One of the men rode up and deprived him of his guns.

"Shoot *gringo* with own gun," he grunted. "Good joke, *si?*"

One of the men spoke sharply in Spanish. The first man shrugged and rode back.

"I'm looking for *la bandida,* Carlota," said Nash.

The men laughed. "You see her," promised one with an evil grin. "Carlota no like *gringos.* You come!"

Nash followed them through a maze of shallow arroyos to a verdant, high walled valley. The number of horses and men astonished him. Carlota had a veritable army. Men lounged about smoking and talking. Their women stood about open fires cooking food.

As they drew near the mouth of the valley, Nash was surprised to see a squat, adobe hut so cunningly made that it blended with the wall of the cliff that served as its back.

They dismounted. The men snatched off their sombreros. Nash did likewise. The leader knocked timidly on the door. He had lost his arrogance—was now meek and servile.

THE door opened and there stood the fabled Carlota. Nash stared in shocked wonder. She was young; very young—not more than nineteen or twenty. He noticed first that she was small and compact. Then, that her hair and eyes were black, her skin dusky. Sneering lips were red and revealed white, even teeth.

She wore a knee length skirt, boots, and a blouse open at the throat. The inner slopes of pert, cup shaped breasts glistened brownly and the silk fabric clung to their precise contours. She was slim-hipped, long-legged and of graceful carriage.

She threw back her head and laughed.

"Ma'am," he blurted, "I'm goin' away, even if I did win, fair and square."

Then she glared fiercely and her insane eyes became twin pools of hate. Terror seized him. She was mad—stark, raving mad!

She wet her lips. Then she took a step forward and lashed out with a short quirt. It caught him across the mouth. His lip split. Blood oozed down his chin. He made no outcry.

"*Gringo* pig!" she spat. "Speak one word and the tongue I will cut from your mouth! Soon we ride. All here will ride for a raid. But first I fix you."

She laughed again. Then snapped a command to her men. They threw Nash on the ground and trussed his hands and feet. One kicked him. Laughing madly, the girl walked to his head. Looking up, he could see how her skirt swished about upper legs that were slim and firm and bronzed and vanished in a brief garment that shadowed her thighs.

Then she raised a foot and raked his face with her sharp spurs! The rowel turned easily. Thank God for that. But

the sharp points sank into his cheek leaving a line of tiny, blood-oozing holes. Three times she roweled his face. He gritted his teeth. His face was a bloody mess. Despite the agony of pain, the rippling play of muscles in her legs fascinated him.

She dropped to her knee and lifted his head in her arms. Her eyes were wide and vacant. Then she kissed him in mad savagery. She drew away and laughed. His blood streaked her face. Her nostrils dilated. Again she kissed him. Then she dropped him and wiped her face, stared down at her blood smeared fingers. Again that mad laughter. Rising, she adjusted the blouse that had become disarranged in the embrace. The white material was stained with blood.

"Renaldo," she said in a soft, purring voice. "A steer we slaughtered. The hide is still fresh. Bring me a strip."

The men laughed. Soon Renaldo returned with a still wet strip of rawhide. Grinning, she placed it about Nash's forehead and knotted it at the back of his head. Then she kissed him very tenderly, drew away and looked at him and spat in his face.

"Now we ride," she said. "Soon the sun will shrink the hide and your head will go 'Poom!' *Adios,* pretty one."

She strode away followed by her men. Nash rolled over. The entire encampment mounted and raced from the valley. He stared. He was quite alone.

FOR an hour he struggled. The rawhide was contracting. His head was squeezed as if in a vice. The hide bit into his forehead. The pain was intolerable. His ears roared.

Though his feet were tied, he could part his knees. Rolling face down he discovered that by rocking his hips he could worm forward. Face pressed to earth, he did so.

Ahead was the open door of the hut, within, surcease from the deadly sun. Inch by inch he advanced. He was drenched with sweat. Jabs of pain shot through his head like flashes of lightning. Half way there the pain brought blindness. He struggled on. His body was numb. Each movement was agony. Yet he gritted his teeth and waddled forward.

After centuries, it seemed, he struck the stone step. His head seemed to weigh a ton. Somehow he managed to raise it and jerk forward. Cheek against the cool stone, he rested. His head was now in the shadows. He panted like a beast. Blood and foam flecked his nose and mouth. Slowly the pressure on his head abated.

He felt stronger and managed to crawl within the hut. He could see then. There was a pail of water there. He upset it with his shoulders and wiped his head in the cool water. The rawhide relaxed slightly. Again he rested.

A small fire burned in the fireplace. He sat up and squirmed, feet first, towards it. He thrust his boots into the fire. Pain swarmed up his legs. He steeled himself. Finally the rope caught fire. It parted! He struggled to his feet and danced an anguished jig.

Then he spotted another pail of water, stood in it, soothing his blistered feet. Glancing about for some means of freeing his hands, he saw nothing. Even had he wanted to, there was no way to back against the fireplace.

Panic seized him. It was growing late. The bandits would be returning soon, for they'd taken no provisions. He staggered to the door. The sun was low. God! For how long had he endured that agony! He had to escape. The rawhide strip was still vise-like about his

head. To venture into the sun would be madness.

Then he saw that a creek ran through the valley. He followed its source to a narrow, steep-walled ravine. Hope heartened him. Within the gully would be escape from the sun.

He left the hut and staggered towards the ravine. By the time he reached the shadowy darkness the rawhide had begun to tighten. He lowered his head to the rushing waters. The squeeze eased a little.

He waded upstream. Best get as far away as possible. A half mile upstream the creek widened to form a deep, quiet pool. At one side a slab of rock projected, roof like, above the surface of the water.

He entered the pool and angled towards the ledge. Reaching it, he sat down and backed beneath it. The water reached his chin. But it was blissfully cool there. He rested. Night fell. His groping hands found a jagged rock. He began to saw his bonds against it. An hour passed. Two hours. The rope parted.

It took painful minutes to remove the rawhide. It had formed an exquisitely painful welt about his head. Gently he massaged his head. As circulation was restored, the numbness fled. But he had a pounding headache. That, too, soon vanished. The moon lighted the pool with lurid brilliance. He bathed his face, washed the dirt and caked blood from the rowel marks.

A sound stiffened every muscle in his body! Then, furtively he peered out.

ON a flat stone across the pool stood Carlota! She'd just taken off her shirt. Her dusky torso was very plain in the silvery light. Those pert little breasts quivered as she took off her boots. Her hands fumbled with her skirt. It fell! She raised her arms overhead and stretched. A "something-or-other" was bound about her slim hips. He stared appreciatively at her long, slender legs.

She dove into the pool with hardly a splash, and began swimming to and fro. Now and then a coppery leg came glistening to view. Twice she swam on her back and her breasts plouged twin wakes through the still waters.

Then she ventured near his hiding place. Her hands reached up and caught the slab of stone above his head. Golden shoulders shimmered wetly. Two little breasts glistened at the surface; then each knee in turn as her legs threshed.

He tackled her about the knees! Before she could make an outcry he plunged her head under water. Her legs and arms threshed as she struggled with amazing strength. He pulled her up. She gasped for air. He slapped a hand over her mouth. Her breath through his spread fingers made a whistling sound. His free arm went about her torso. Her breast rose and fell against his forearm.

"Ah, beautiful one," Nash gasped, for the torture had weakened him. "I want my ten thousand dollars. But I'd much rather drown you." He ducked her again. She came up sputtering.

"*Gringo*, pig!" she gasped. "I have no money of yours."

"Liar! The ransom I paid for *Señor* Richter."

"Ransom! Richter? Of what do you speak?"

He shook her savagely. "You know damned well."

"But I know not," she wailed in so genuine puzzlement that Nash stopped shaking her. She frowned. "Where was this?"

(Continued on page 104)

RANGE

The woman had wanted her husband killed, and now it's Jim Logan's job to bring in the killer, even though he loves the killer's sister.

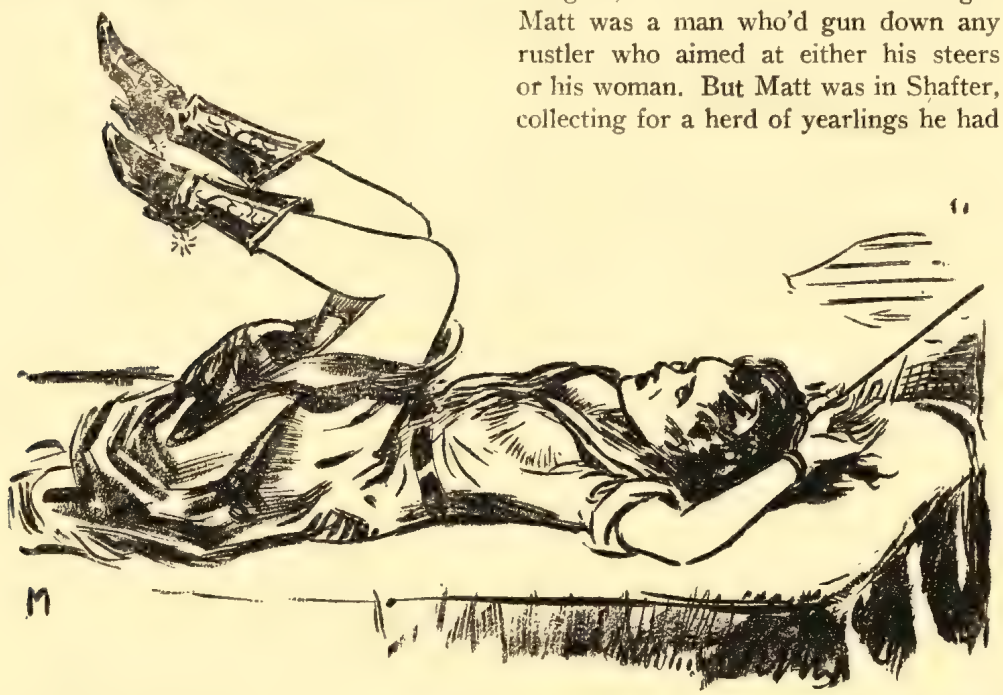
THE woman leaned forward in her chair and clasped her hands about her kneecaps. Her kimono gaped wide, and began to fall away from the twin mounds of smooth white flesh that made her bosom such a fascination to masculine eyes.

Pete Tramper, the bronc wrangler she had called into the ranch house from the corral, stood over her and let his gaze wander down the ravine that separated those tempting globes, and his eyes glittered. His face was wolfish and his look furtive, yet Julia Bengold seemed to take a woman's full satisfaction from the effect glimpses of her bare skin was having on him.

When she leaned back and unclasped her hands, she let the skirts of her kimono fall aside, exposing her black-stockinged legs and an inch of milky thighs.

Pete Tramper moistened his thick lips.

Julia Bengold was the wife of Matt Bengold, owner of the Double Triangle. Matt was a man who'd gun down any rustler who aimed at either his steers or his woman. But Matt was in Shafter, collecting for a herd of yearlings he had delivered. And Julia Bengold had called into the house the only hand left on the ranch, and she was alone in a thin kimono which she carelessly let fall open, permitting him to feast his eyes.



He shuffled close, his hands reaching. She motioned him off in a way that stopped him, at least temporarily.

LAW

BY STEWART GATES

"I'll untie you when you're willing to be quiet," he said.

"I HEARD my husband tell you that he gave you a job only because of your sister," the woman said. "He says there's talk of you bein' a killer."

Pete Tramper's face went dark and his lids narrowed dangerously. "If you sent for me jest to tell me that," he grumbled, "what are you actin' the way you are for? I was figgerin'—"

The woman moved seductively, one of her buoyant breasts threatening to escape its covering altogether. "Maybe you can keep on figgerin'," she said, "but first I'll tell you what I want. Could I figger on trusting you, Pete Tramper, in a scheme I've got? Maybe there'll be a killing in it. But there would be money for both you an' me. And if you rode straight trail with me, there might be something else for you. There'd be me."

She got up languorously and walked with a sensuous sway to a table in the middle of the room. Perching on a corner, she let a long, full shaped leg dangle free. Her eyes invited the wrangler and he went over and put a hand on her knee, his fingers trembling.

"You tell me what the killin' is," he said, his thick voice eager, "an' about the money. Them two things you promises is temptin', money an' you. I'll ride straight."

The woman's eyes suddenly narrowed and she removed his hand. "It wouldn't be safe to double cross me," she said. "I've been hearing about you hanging 'round that half breed Carmelita that helps in the cook house. Maybe you'd get the money and turn to her instead of me."

Her kimono skirts inched farther away from her legs, as if to give Pete Tramper a chance right there to compare her to the half breed. He looked down at what he could see of the bare round of thigh flattened against the table top. The woman didn't move while his eyes ran over her full hip and on up her back until they found the warm flesh of a bare shoulder from which the kimono had fallen.

"Carmelita!" he grunted with a show of disgust. "She ain't nothin' to me. She's jest like a young calf you like to see jump once in a while. When you figgerin' on tellin' me what you aim for me to do?"

She slid down from the table and swayed up to him, pressing her generously curved body against his own. Her quivering, alive breasts were firm and warm against his cambray shirt.

"We must plan soon," she announced, "because Matt Bengold will be home tomorrow night. But maybe I'd better get to know you better before I tell you what to do for me—and yourself."

Pete Tramper loosened his gun belt and slid it onto the table. Without another word being spoken, she was pliant in his arms . . .

IT was more than an hour later when Pete Tramper came out into the yards. The only figure in the yard was the voluptuous little Carmelita, who watched for him from the cook house door. He could see that she was waiting especially for him, that afternoon, because the cook had gone into town and they could be all alone in the cook house. But there wasn't the usual eagerness in her piquant face.

She caught both his hands and drew him into the big grub room and shut the door behind them. She didn't speak when he picked her up and carried her to a bench. When he had arranged her on his knee to suit himself, thinking all the time how much softer and dainter her brown-skinned legs were than Julia Bengold's lush white ones, she suddenly beat her fists against his chest.

"You weel not do eet!" she breathed. "You weel not do thees theeng she want!"

Pete Tramper whirled her body around and lifted her pointed chin roughly. Her eyes, two great black moons, were filled with fright. He handled her so roughly her white blouse burst open and the upper slopes of her sun-shadowed breasts rippled and throbbed before his eyes.

"What do you know?" he demanded threateningly. "How do you know what she wants?"

"Carmelita, she know." She tried to squirm closer to him, wriggling along his lap until she could get no closer. Her short skirt slid up over her bare knees. "I start to come into the house. I hear words that hurt me 'cause another woman say thees words to you. I listen to make sure I hear you kees, then other words come. Words about the money and the keeling if you have to keel. I hear how she weel follow you. You weel not do eet—leave your Carmelita to do that."

WITH an oath he flung her onto the floor, his fingers fastening in her

blouse and tearing it away, leaving her rounded body almost bare above her hips. Only her hair, cascading over her shoulders, partially protected her nudity. Her legs flew into the air, bare from her sandals to a white fringe that circled her thighs above her knees.

She didn't make any complaint when he lifted her up by an armpit and held her so that her toes barely touched the floor while he slapped her face again and again, her head snapping back with each vicious crack. Tiring of holding her, he dropped her to the floor again and kicked her huddled-up little form brutally. She drew her knees up and guarded her face between them while the rain of blows lasted.

Suddenly he stopped kicking and stood over her with a frown. She was afraid to cover her legs and thighs with her skirt or cover her breasts with her arms for fear it would madden him anew. Abruptly he lifted her again. She looked at him meekly.

"Carmelita let you beat her all you weesh eef only you do not keel a man and then leave her for another woman."

He changed his expression and twisted his mouth into a grin. A crafty look came into his eyes.

"I knocked you around because you're a damn fool," he said. "Don't you know I figgered to take you with me? I ain't aimin' to take Matt Bengold's wife. An' maybe there won't be no killin'."

She searched his face to read the truth. He ran his hand down her back and drew her close. The touch seemed to reassure her.

"If Carmelita can't keep you from keeling and robbing," she murmured, "she go weeth you anyhow."

He was gruff again and caught her shoulder with a grip that made her body tremble until her breasts quivered like flowers in a breeze.

"You keep your damn mouth shet. If you don't, I'll wear out a latigo on you an' then I'll tear you apart. You ain't knowin' nothin', no matter what happens."

THE morning after Matt Bengold returned to the Double Diamond from Shafter with his herd money, Sheriff Steve Garvin, old and grizzled, looked up from a sick bed into the lean, grim face of his youngest but best gun throwing deputy, Jim Logan.

"You say Matt Bengold jest died?" Sheriff Steve repeated the news Jim Logan had brought to the country seat from the Double Triangle. "An' you say he recognized Pete Tramper, after Pete thought he'd shot him to death?"

"It's laid on Pete, all right," the deputy agreed. "But what stumps me an' Missus Bengold is how the devil Pete knew where Matt had hidden the herd money he brought in from Shafter. Eleven thousand dollars, it was."

"We don't have to figger how he knew where it was," the sheriff grunted. "What we got to do is round Pete up. It may be a tough job, 'cause Pete is sure to tie up with a couple other blacklegs, just for the sake of their guns. It's your job."

A black frown crossed the deputy's face. "Look here, Steve. Ain't there no other way to handle this thing? I mean can't we get a deputy from the next county? It was me who had to jail Pete Tramper's daddy more'n a year ago for that stage business. Now I jest hate like all blazes to go ambling out to that shack where Pete's sister lives and tell her we got to find her brother and string him up. It's too plumb bad news for me to be takin' to that girl."

Sheriff Steve snorted. "Hell! He ain't no brother to Kate Tramper. They ain't by rights no relation. Mort Tramp-

er had this coyote for a son long before he palmed himself off on Kate's mother an' then worked her to death before the girl was more'n a baby."

"All the same," Jim Logan persisted, "she didn't know he was a blackleg till she growed up. Then she kind o' stuck to him, figgerin' it was her job to be loyal. An' she's always hoped Pete would turn out thoroughbred. She's never believed the things we know about him but can't prove."

The sheriff shook his massive head. "None of it can be helped, Jim. It's your job. An' when you got a job to do, you got to do it. An' maybe it'd be more merciful fer you to carry her the news than somebody she didn't know."

CURSING his luck, the lanky, steady-eyed deputy turned his horse's nose into Windy Canyon, on the trail that led to the old cabin which, since her father had been caught dead to rights in a stage hold up, had been the home she'd kept for Pete Tramper.

He knew what kind of a reception he'd get from Kate.

Since the Law caught up with her dad, and had begun to suspect Pete, whom she'd always considered a brother even if he wasn't, she'd turned into a spitfire. Jim Logan was sure that in her heart Kate knew that her dad deserved all he got and should have had it long before. But he was "family" and she was stubborn. It wouldn't have been so bad on her if she hadn't begun hearing that the Law was already on Pete's trail. She'd always believed in Pete.

The rickety old cabin was laid out on a rise from the canyon floor, circled by brush and cottonwoods. Jim took his horse up the slope as cautiously as possible. But Kate Tramper heard the hoofs before they reached level. When Jim rode out on the flat in front of the cabin, Kate was running toward the house from a spring that trickled out of the canyon wall beyond the cabin.

She hadn't been expecting visitors, Jim could see that. She wore only a thin gingham dress that was open at the throat and turned back. Jim could see the quivering of her glorious breasts as she flew past the nose of his horse for the cabin porch. He knew she had no other garments on under that thin, almost transparent dress, for the sun was behind her as she ran and the curves of her body and the long sweep of her perfectly tapered legs were silhouetted under the dress and were smooth and unbroken.

She didn't say a word in answer to his shout as she disappeared in the house. But in another instant she was on the porch with a double barreled shotgun leveled at the rider in the clearing. Her feet were spread apart and her green eyes were blazing down the barrel.

"You get away from this house, Jim Logan. You sneakin' lyin' law man. I know what you came for. You want to ask more of your skunk's questions about Pete. I tell you Pete's all right. And I tell you again no lawman is ever goin' to put his foot on this porch and lift it up alive."

DEPUTY Jim shifted uneasily in his saddle. He knew that Kate Tramper intended to be as good as her word. That shotgun would blast his head off if he made a move to approach the cabin. And he wasn't in a hurry to leave, now that he was here. She was standing against the sun again and she might as well have had nothing on at all.

Jim thought the body outlined by the sun was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Her legs, spread that way, were like two sculptured columns form-

"You're a damn' fool!" he said. "I was aimin' to take you with me anyway—not Matt Bengold's wife!"

ing an inverted V. Her hips were perfectly rounded, and her breasts would be soft and yet firm, he knew, to the man she'd ever let hold her against him.

And Jim Logan had wanted to do just that for a long time, even if she were ready to blow him to bits.

At last he said, "Now, look here, Kate. I've some news to give you, And I brought it because I'm your friend."

Her eyes seemed to shoot fires of hate down the barrel. He thought she was going to blast away. She caught her breath and took a quick step toward him, the gun unwavering. She was holding it so fiercely he could almost see the bruise the stock would leave on the tender skin of her right shoulder.

"I don't want none of your lyin' news, Jim Logan," she blazed. "I wouldn't believe anything a law man told me."

"But I want to help you, Kate."

"I don't need anybody's help. No snivelin' creepin' lawman's help, nohow. You'd like to catch somethin' on Pete, an' Pete's all I've got left." Her soft lips trembled suddenly. An inward sob rocked her breasts, until they were almost escaped the opened collar. Their tints were a delightful sun-tan. Jim

wondered if she sunned that beautiful body of hers, out here in the isolation of Windy Canyon. "I hate all law men," she cried in a sort of moan. "I—I 'specially hate you, Jim Logan."

"Now you listen to me, Kate Tramper," the deputy said slowly. "Maybe you'll shoot that blunderbuss at me for tellin' you what I have to, but I can't help it. Somebody else'd been ungentler. Matt Bengold of the Double Triangle, where Pete's been wrangling for a spell, was killed last night and his money box with eleven thousand dollars in it is gone."

The girl crouched for steadier aim. Jim had been watching. Just in time, he dug his spur into his pony's flank and the animal leaped ahead from a standstill. It was a trick its rider had taught the pony.

Both barrels of the shot gun belched powdersmoke, and the tiny slugs whistled through the air. As far off as he was, Jim's shoulder felt the sting of three slugs that had begun to spread out. He winced but ignored the sting. On his feet like lightning, he grabbed the smoking gun, tore it from the girl's grasp, and then pinioned her arms down with his own.

"Spitfire!" he grunted. "If you were my sister—or my girl for that matter—I'd teach you a lesson you wouldn't forget."

"I'll never be your girl, Jim Logan. No lawman's girl. Let me go or I'll scratch your dirty low-down eyes out."

"We'll see about that." He wrapped his arm around her and held her, so she couldn't kick, and picked her up. He carried her into the house and found the end of a severed latigo. The girl's breath whistled through clenched teeth.

"Don't you dare touch me with that strap," she screamed at her captor. "If you lay it on me just once, I'll come to town to shoot you in the back, if I can't get you no other ways."

HE forced her down on a couch and turned her over onto her stomach so he could tie her wrists behind her, then he rolled her onto her back. "I'm not givin' strap lessons to folks, 'less I have the right," he said. "But you've got to hear me, and be quiet, then I'll untie you an' we'll talk things over.

In her fury she kicked at him, her toes barking his shins. Her skirts flew up when she kicked and settled down above her knees. Her thighs, Jim saw, were the same sun tint as the flesh of her firm breasts. He wanted to pull her skirts down over her knees, while he was holding her on the couch with a hand on her shoulder, but he didn't want to call her attention to her bare legs.

"I was sayin'," he said, "about Matt Bengold bein' roped for good. An' the money gone. Matt recognized the killer before he died. Pete disappeared from the ranch right after the robbery, and it was Pete that Matt recognized."

He felt the slender body in his grasp quiver, then it seemed to freeze. She tried to get up but his grip was like iron.

"I dare you to untie my hands before you go," she got out at last, her voice like a dagger. "You know that I'll find some way of killing you if you do. I'll find another gun and follow you."

"It's true, Kate. We've got to find him. If he was here during the night, it's your duty to tell me. Maybe he hid the money near here."

All she would say, was, "Get away from here, Jim Logan! Take your foul lies with you!"

He knew it was no use. He was sure Pete Tramper hadn't been at the cabin during the night. If he had come near and buried the money, it would be use-

less to look for it in the tangle of brush up and down the canyon side.

He let the girl go, getting out of range of her kicking feet. She tore desperately at her bonds. "I'm taking you a piece down the trail," he told her, "so you won't be able to find another shootin' iron and come after me. I'll untie your hands down there."

He put her in the saddle. She bit at him but he ignored it. She was good to pick up and hold, he thought, her soft flesh warm to his hands through the gingham dress. He forked her in front of him so she couldn't slide down, and her dress crumpled far up along her lovely, tapered thighs. Jim tried not to look, but failed. He had to watch that rippling flesh while he rode along, and more than once he found a way to brush a rounded thigh with his bridle hand.

SHERIFF STEVE GARVIN listened glumly to Jim's account of his visit. "With a spitfire like that, it ain't safe to go visitin' that cabin at all," the sheriff agreed. "But sooner or later Pete will show up there. A killer like him always does a fool thing. You got to pitch camp somewhere in the brush on the canyon side, up over the house, where you can look down and watch. Nights, you can steal close enough to hear if any one shows up."

Jim Logan took a circuitous route which brought him down the canyon wall from above. In a thicket of tall aspens he pitched his camp—just his blanket—and he cooked salt pork for food. He was within seventy-five yards of the clearing, with a full view when he cautiously parted his aspen screen.

At noon of the first day he discovered that Kate did, indeed, take sun baths. She pottered about the clearing all morning, in her transparent gingham dress, carrying wood and water and sweeping the porch. Jim hated to spy on her, but the law has its job to do, and he had to be careful that Pete might not have slipped inside during the night without making a noise and was hiding inside. He could tell only by the girl's actions.

He knew Pete wasn't there when the noon sun beat down. Kate came into the middle of the clearing and lifted her hands to the top of her dress. Slowly she let the garment settle down over her upper body, holding it crumpled about her waist. She stood there, straight as a young goddess, for minute on minute, turning slowly around when one side of her was too hot.

Jim forced himself to look away at last. When he took another glance to see if she was finished, he gasped. She was just stepping into her dress. For a minute she had been bared completely! Jim shut his eyes sharply, but the fleeting glimpse he had of round thighs, hips, and curving waist, was already burned into his brain.

IT was afternoon of the third day when Kate came out in a boy's overalls carrying a light carbine. "She found another gun all right," Jim reflected.

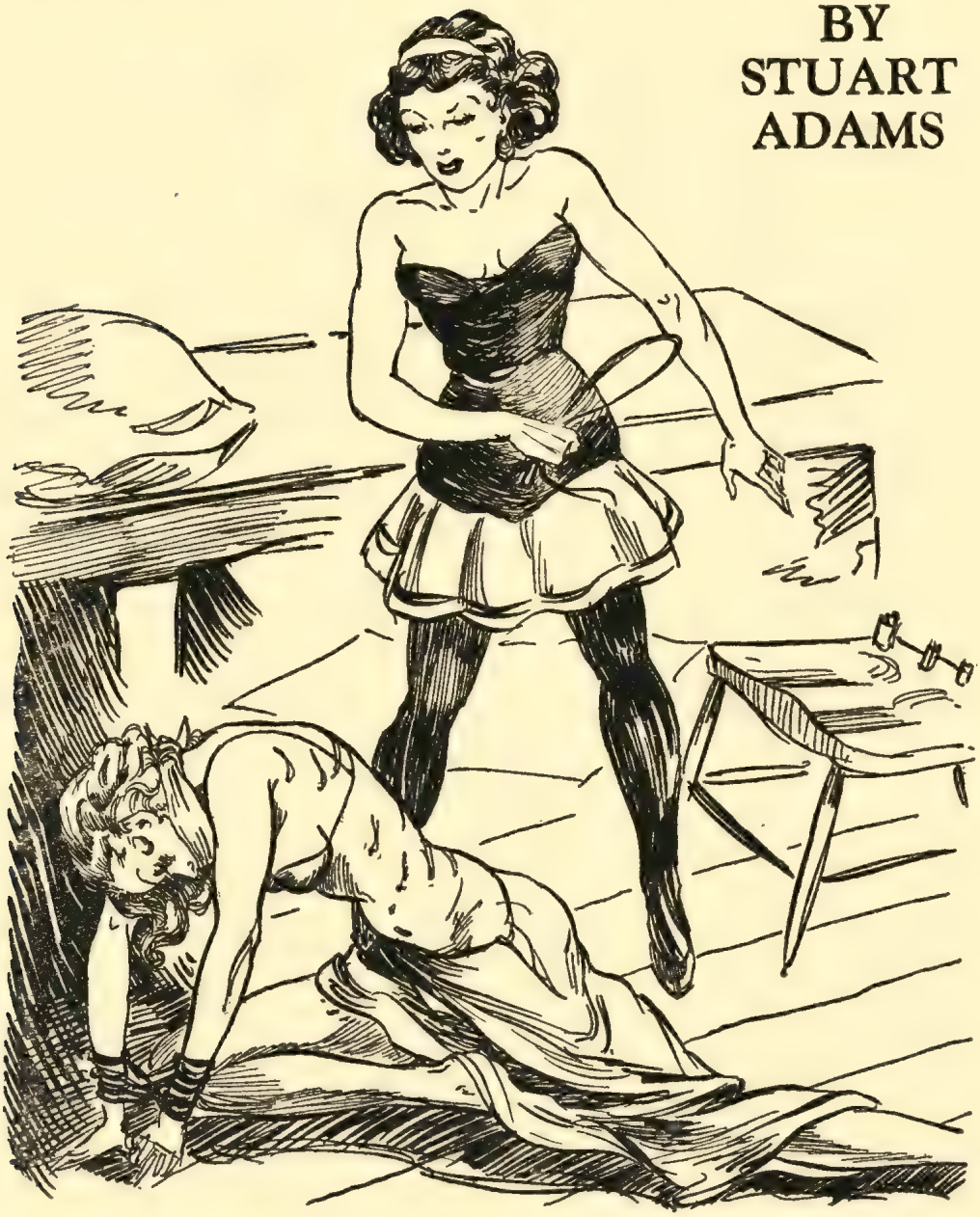
She saddled her shaggy little pony, forked it, and with the carbine across her saddle, turned the pony upward along a path that climbed to the flat lands above. Jim didn't know whether the girl had discovered him and was deliberately going above him for a good shot down, or if she was going to meet her renegade step-brother. He circled back through the brush to the spot where his own pony was patiently dozing, and took the ascending path as far behind the girl as he dared.

The pony's hoof marks led up until they reached a series of benches, rocky and broken, where the timber thinned

(Continued on page 94)

THE COYOTE

BY STUART ADAMS



THE COYOTE KID felt pangs of deepest remorse when he came across the dead body of Bart Weston, Circle J owner, in Hell's Gulch. The Kid took it hard because he blamed himself for letting Bart get himself killed. He might have saved him if he hadn't been ogling a woman's curves at the time.

The Kid had rounded up the best girl Cross Trails offered in the Bearcat Saloon, at the very same time some lobo

KID

Bart might never have died if The Kid hadn't been fooling around with a dance-hall girl at the time. And because he loved Bart like a father, he swore never to be tempted by a woman again.

was knifing Bart, the Kid's best friend.

When he was going through the Gulch alone later he almost passed Bart's body. There was no moon, and Bart lay in greasewood shadows. The Kid's mind was still on the Bearcat woman. She'd been surprised when he stopped to stare at the swelling half moons that bulged out of the top of her dress. The Bearcat girls had often considered the lean young cowboy, and knew he was curious about them, but he'd always backed away with a muttered, "Thank you kind-

Queenie was like a tigress when The Kid bounded in.

ly, ma'am. I just ain't in the notion for company."

They would shrug bare shoulders, shrug their breasts lower into their dresses, and turn away to giggle. Tonight he had decided he wouldn't be laughed at again.

She had been right pleasing, that red-mouthed, green-eyed girl. Warm and welcoming. Made him feel right at home when he had tasted the dampness of the red lips and had come to a closer view of the sway of her full curved hips and had had a more generous glimpse of the white thighs that contrasted with the blackness of her stockings. He was remembering the roundness of her clinging arms and the way her soft breasts had crushed against him, when he rode through the Gulch. It was his blaze-faced roan that discovered the body, and shied.

Blood had stopped flowing from a deep knife wound. It already was clotted by the night's heat. The Kid made a vow then and there that when he found the man who killed Bart he'd snake his .45 with the quickness of a coyote's spring.

The Kid came natural to the name-brand he wore. Years before, Bart had found him, a snarling, clawing boy who lived in a coyote's den. Bart took him in, and an old cook at Circle J taught him to read and write and figure. Nobody knew where he had come from. Sometimes, in his face, was a look of a prairie wolf's shrewdness and a coyote's cunning.

While he circled around the body of his benefactor, he was more wolf than coyote in his hate. He looked, but found that the knife was nowhere about. It had probably been withdrawn from the wound, for the killer must have pinned his victim by throwing from a distance. No knifer would ever get near enough to Bart Weston to knife him by hand.

When the Kid had carried his friend to the Circle J, he remounted his roan and galloped back into the Gulch and on to Cross Trails.

THE GIRL he had held in his arms while Bart was being murdered saw him come into the Bearcat. Her red lips twisted into a knowing smile as he pushed his way through cowboys, gamblers and range riffraff toward her. She would be getting more of that money in his snakeskin money belt, she thought. As she squared her shoulders so that her breasts would lift and thrust out their peach-bloom smoothness toward him. When he stood over her she smirked. Her smirk died abruptly and her hands went up to cover the two hillocks she had flaunted a moment before. The Kid's eyes were glittering, hard with hate.

The girl shrieked and recoiled when his gun came out in a lightning flash. He reached for her and swept her up, tossing her over his shoulder, her head hanging at his back, her black stockinged legs kicking the air in front of him, white thighs flashing bare.

Gun leveled, the Kid backed around the room, carrying his squirming burden. Patrons of the Bearcat swayed in front of him, but his gun held them back. After all, few cared what a man had a notion to do with a red skirt he favored.

He pitched her across the roan's saddle. Instead of turning toward the Circle J, where his bunk was, the Kid swerved into a cow trail that led to an abandoned shack once used for storing running irons and range stoves. It was a windowless hut, its only opening, besides the heavy wooden doors being an open square in the high roof. It was

empty except for a beddown of straw under a mattress on the floor in a corner.

When he tossed the girl on the floor, she scrambled to her feet, her nails clawing for his face. "Range rat!" she fumed. "Think you can keep me here just to have your fun with me and not pay for it?"

He caught her hands and held them while he fastened his fingers in the collar of her dress. With one jerk he ripped the dress away and flung it aside. The girl had worn no other garment under her red dress but a bit of white that concealed little of her melon like breasts and a scant breadth of the same material about her hips. She stood before him nude save for those scanty coverings and her stockings. Her breasts shook with fury and her white legs quivered so violently that her knees knocked together.

"You needn't be afraid, ma'am—I'll tell you why I'm bringin' you. It was you that kept me from ridin' tonight with my friend Bart Weston. He wouldn't be dead if it wasn't for the temptin' things about a woman. I'm keepin' you here till you don't tempt me no more. I'm keepin' you till I know I can do without women and they won't mean nothin' to me again."

He gathered up her torn dress and took it with him when he went out. At the door he said, "I'll keep you in grub."

IN THE light of morning the Kid found a piece of torn cloth in the mesquite near where Bart Weston had lain. It was black and shiny. The killer had worn a garment of that kind of cloth, but where would there be a range shirt like that?

The Kid knew of one enemy Bart had, Nate Melhorn, who had an outfit of renegades running a spread south of Circle J. Bart accused Melhorn's outfit of rustling his calves before roundup and branding them with Nate's own Circle Bar Circle.

Another big ranch, the Ross Talbot spread, touched both the Circle J and the Circle Bar Circle. Talbot and Weston hadn't spoken for years. Not since they fought over the rights to a water hole Weston had fenced in. Maybe, the Kid thought, Ross Talbot was still after that water hole.

Before he turned the roan's nose off the Circle J the Kid returned to the branding shack. The girl, who called herself Queenie, jumped up from the mattress. In her tussle with him, the narrow bit of white that so little covered her breasts had slipped up about her neck. She had not put it back into place. The kid caught her hair and brought it around over her shoulders so that the lush hillocks were at least partly draped. Queenie sneered at him.

"Still afraid of a woman's charms, after all?"

He threw grub and gurbas of water onto the floor and then, silent, sat down with his back against the doors. There, in his silence, he let his hate run and feed on the sight of the woman that had kept him from his friend's side.

He watched while the girl walked about the shack, her flaring hips swaying, her breasts shaking free from the yellow veil of her hair, deliberately, artfully, she laughed at him when she saw him flush. Went close and held her full red lips an inch from his. She purred soft words, the words a woman knows how to use and give her own meaning to, poured them in his ears, now mocking him, now coaxing, teasing.

His blood raced and his hands shook, but he won his first round with the woman. He flung her away from him

and went out, clamping the door behind him.

He sent the roan back to the Circle J alone, knowing the animal would find its way. Then he turned his own feet toward the Ross Talbot spread, which was nearer than Nate Melhorn's, and crept furtively through the cottonwoods that surrounded the main buildings. A Chinaman shuffled out of the cook house. The Kid studied him closely.

The Chink wore a jacket-coat of black shiny cloth, like the piece of cloth that he had found where Bart Weston had fallen. The Kid had seen only a few Chinks in his time, but felt that he ought to have known at once that the cloth had been torn from the sort of a coat a chink would wear.

The Chink demanded, "What you want?" But before the Kid could answer there was a movement behind him. A girl was getting up from a hammock swung on the house porch. Her feet were hanging over and her skirt had crept up about her knees. She was staring at the stranger who had come out of the cottonwoods.

The Kid gazed at the dangling legs. They were slenderer and more shapely than Queenie's legs. The round, bare thighs he could glimpse above her stockings gleamed palely where they melted into soft shadows. His very wondering about this woman aroused his rage at himself.

"I want to see Ross Talbot," he said curtly, "but I ain't askin' no woman to send him."

The girl gazed at him coolly. Her breasts would be like little apples, he guessed. He couldn't see them but they pushed impudently against the thin cambric of her waist. He caught himself wishing he could tear off that waist, same as he'd torn off the other's dress, and then he was enraged with himself again. He must never think that way of a woman again.

"Ross Talbot is my father," said the girl coolly. "You will have to tell me what you want."

"I'm grub-walking. I want a job on this spread." While he said that his eyes flicked at the staring Chinaman.

The girl motioned toward the house. "Follow me." He followed her. Her slim hips rippled a little with each step. Her dress whipped around legs that were firm and long.

ROSS TALBOT, a long lean weather bitten rancher, didn't know, or said he didn't, that Bart Weston had been killed. He did know of the boy Bart had taken from a coyote den. "Whyn't you stay on the Circle J? Bart bein' dead don't mean there's no range ridin'?"

"I got reasons. I ain't givin' 'em to you, even for a job, because you an' Bart was agin each other."

"We forgot that long ago," Talbot said. "I wasn't against him. We was jest shy o' each other I guess, us havin' such trouble in the past. I'm right sorry he's gone." He turned to the girl. "What you think, Letty? Can we use another rider?"

The Kid was at the point of sayin' he didn't want no job handed him by a woman, but didn't get the chance. The girl shrugged a shoulder. "I suppose you could use him, out of a kindly feeling for your old enemy, if for nothing else."

The Kid was worried about the Chink while that slant-eye set out grub. If Ross Talbot was kindly feelin' to Bart, his Chink wouldn't be the knife thrower. But there was the black cloth of his jacket. He didn't know of any other Chinks around.

Presently Letty came out of the house

in a riding skirt. She told him that she would show him around the ranch. He roped a horse for her and a mustang for himself, out of the corral. They rode into a network of trails and brought up sharp on the brink of an arroyo. Below them three men had roped a calf and were running an iron. Near the bleating calf, a yearling cow had been hog

With one jerk he ripped her dress away.

tied. The Kid looked at his companion.

"No," she said, her voice tight. "They aren't our people. They're Nate Melhorn's renegades. Chances are if we rode around and came upon them in the arroyo we'd find that the cow wears our brand, or that its brand has been altered. No telling how much stock we lose that way every year."

The Kid said, "Say the word, ma'am, since I'm ridin' for you now, an' I'll go down there."

She shook her head quickly. "You mustn't do that. There would be gun fighting."

"I'm handy with my shootin' iron, Miss."

She looked at him. She rode forked, and her riding skirt was tight against her legs. One round knee was frankly showing, and if she wore anything to confine the little mounds of her breasts under her waist, their gallop had shaken them free. They trembled when she moved. The Kid couldn't keep his eyes from them. He decided he'd have to spend long hours scoffing at Queenie, back in the shack, before he'd get to not thinking about a woman.

"I believe you can handle your gun," she agreed. "But I don't want you to risk your life. I'm taking an interest in you."

The Kid liked that, though he grumbled to himself. Must he always be fighting off women, now that he had gotten accustomed to one of them and hated the whole sex because of it?

They were coming into the spread, riding through the surrounding brush, when suddenly and without warning, the Kid's gun snapped out from its holster. Blue flame spat an explosion into the mesquite and juniper. The brush shook violently as spurts of dust flew up from broken stalks. The girl shrieked.

"What was it? What did you do that for?"

Her father appeared around a corner of the house. He ran into the brush and just as the Kid and the girl reached him, he straightened over the body of a thin, round faced Chinese who wore a black shiny jacket. In the back of his neck was the hole the Kid's slug had made. On the ground was a long handled, long bladed knife.

"I saw him swing back for the throw," the Kid said grimly. "He lifted the knife so high I caught the glitter of sun on the blade. He was throwing toward the house."

"I was the only one in range from here," Ross Talbot said. "Who would want me killed?"

Letty gave a cry. "This is Su Chung—an odd jobber for Nate Melhorn!"

"So Nate has decided to get me out of the way so he can bully you, my daughter, out of the range!" He turned to the Kid. "You sure are plumb fast on the draw and sightin', Mister Kid."

"I wanted that knife," said the Kid. "It was a knife thrower and a knife like this that killed Bart Weston. Reckon I know now who was behind it. With both Bart and you off the ranges for good, Nate would pretty well boss this country."

"You saved father's life," Letty said. While they walked to the house she walked close to him. She put one of her hands in his and looked at him in a queer way. "When I can do anything for you," she said in a low voice, "I will."

The Kid felt the same emotion that had come over him when, at the Bearcat, Queenie had swayed her undulant body against him and given him that inviting smile that he figured had caused Bart's death. It was the feeling he'd sworn never to have over another woman.

"When I'm wantin' pay, ma'am, I'll be askin' you," he said sullenly. The girl shot him a startled glance, then smiled to herself.

"Maybe I'll see that you do just that, Mister Coyote Kid. And maybe you'll be wanting pay before you know it."

THAT night the Kid rode his mustang across the range to the forgotten branding shack. He hadn't intended returning for another day, since Queenie had plenty of grub and water. But he wanted to hurry his schooling so he might scorn Letty as well as Queenie.

Queenie got up from the floor. This time she brought her hair around herself to veil her smooth skinned breasts. She looked at the Kid with a new expression, as if she'd been thinking about him during the day.

He looked at her for a while, at the full contours of her hips, the generous sweep of her thighs, and at the half revealed slopes of her plump breasts. She stood quietly, waiting.

"I'm lettin' you go, ma'am," he said at last. "I'll ride into Cross Trails and get some of your clothes, if you'll tell me how to get at 'em, and I'll be payin' you for the ones I tore off. I'll be payin' you your time, too."

She slid up to him, inviting his arms to her warmth and the mysteries of her softness. "I've been thinking," she said, "that I don't want to go. Not 'till you like me again. I'm staying here, just like I am, if you'll keep me in grub and water. I'll be here, and I'll be obedient. I like you right strong, Coyote, and it ain't no good for a man to try hating women."

He couldn't understand the change in her. He insisted upon going to Cross Trails and brought back with him some dresses and little white garments he found there. She would put on only a dress and shoes, nothing else. She warned him, "Like I told you, I'm staying. You can leave the door open, but you'll find me here whenever you come back."

The Kid decided that women sure was like mountain cats. You never know which way they'll jump.

WHILE he rode back to the Talbot spread he tried to figure a way to make sure it was Nate Melhorn who had put the Chink, Su Chung, up to knifing Bart. He knew it was, but he had to have more proof than just knowing. He'd have to prove it to Nate himself that he knew. Then he could kill him—slowly. When he reached the Talbot spread he found a lathered nag in front of the house and heard voices behind. He went around the house and saw a burly jasper talking to Letty.

The girl had been in bed. She wore only her nightgown under a coat. Her little white feet were in slippers. Across the corral a group of Talbot hands sulked because she wouldn't let them at the jasper she was talking to.

She didn't want the Kid to come near. "Dad went to Cross Trails," she said in a frightened voice. "I can tend to this man."

The Kid didn't like her being scared. He asked the big fellow who he was and what he wanted. The ruffian glared at him. The girl said, "He's Harkey Burns. One of Nate Melhorn's men. He thinks we know what became of Su Chung, their Chinese. He says Su Chung came over here today and hasn't shown back."

There was signal in her eyes, if not in her voice, that the Kid understood. The fate of Su Chung must remain secret.

The Kid eyed the big fellow grimly. "I've heard of you, Burns. I've heard Bart Weston talk about you and the Double Circle crew of blacklegs. If Miss Letty says she doesn't know nothing about your slant-eye, you take it for straight rope and vamoose. What would he be doin' on this spread? Maybe tryin' to knife somebody?"

The ruffian fingered his gun belt.

"What Su Chung come to Talbot's for is none of your business, cowboy. But this wench here, she knows he was here an' she's got to say when she seen him. Nate Melhorn wants to know."

The Coyote Kid's fist shot up. A terrific blow on the side of the head felled the renegade.

"Oh, Kid!" the girl wailed. "You've done it again. You'll have us all murdered."

The Kid hated himself when he heard himself saying to a woman, "I don't stand for no such talkin' as that to you. You ain't supposed to be ridin' herd on Chinks nohow."

She swayed to him then, and leaned against him. "I'm so frightened for Dad," she said. "If Melhorn is after us he'll get us." Her body trembled against the Kid. It was a slighter body than Queenie's, but he thought it was softer and warmer and would be even more mysterious. When she turned in the crook of his arm her coat was loose and the open collar of her night gown flared. He glanced once at the halves of her quivering little breasts, glanced once and then pushed her away.

"Maybe I should repay you for today," she said slowly, "before it's too late. Before something happens to Dad or me. But—" she looked down, "can't we get him off the spread before he comes to?"

The Kid called to one of the cowboys and asked for a stout riata. He bent over deliberately and tapped the big fellow's skull with his gun butt. "That'll keep him quiet awhile. Maybe when he comes to he'll forget."

With the cowboys' help he got the blackleg into his saddle. The Kid rode beside him and held him to leather while they rode onto the Double Circle range. A cowboy followed to show him the trail back. They dumped the ruffian on the ground well inside the Melhorn boundaries, and left him there to come to his senses. Then sent his horse galloping off.

LETTY was waiting in the Talbot parlor when the Kid got back. She

came to the porch to call him inside. "Dad may not be home till very late," she said. "You must sit with me a spell."

She still was in her nightgown, but had changed the coat for something thinner, that laid over all her curves when she sat down. She made him sit in a big chair and came over to perch on the chair arm. He started to move but she pushed him back.

"You act like you're afraid of a woman," she accused him.

"I am, Miss," he answered. "I aim to keep bein' afraid of them."

She wanted to know why and of course he couldn't tell her. In fact he'd almost forgotten Queenie. He got to studying the line of Letty's flattened thigh along the chair arm and the rise and fall of her breasts under their thin coverings. He got up stubbornly at last.

"I figure I'd better be goin' out to my bunk, Miss. You figure you're safe in the house alone till your Dad gets back?"

She was provoked. "I seem to be safe, sure enough!"

THE Kid was almost asleep when he heard noises in the yard. He ran out to find the house lit up. On the front porch Ross Talbot talked to a group of cowboys.

"Letty is gone. Someone has carried her off. Took her out of her bed. Even her slippers are still here."

They searched the house again, and then the outbuildings. But the disordered state of Letty's room and the white bed from which she'd been taken, left no doubt that she's been carried off. The Talbot outfit scoured the ranges all night. In the morning the Kid found tracks—two horses—leading away from the house. But they led onto a dusty flat of the range and a night wind had blown them out.

He said, "Don't shoot! You'll hit the girl!"

After dark Ross Talbot and the Kid, with other Talbot riders, rode south onto the Melhorn spread. The buildings were dark. Ross Talbot hammered at the main house door until Nate Melhorn himself, as big and burly as Harkey Burns, came out.

He swore a harsh stream of oaths when Talbot asked him if any of his people had seen Letty. "Time you let me have your range, Talbot," Nate said gruffly, "at a reasonable price. Then you wouldn't be blaming the Circle Bar

for rustlin' and thinkin' up other things to tie onto me."

When they were riding away the Kid said, glumly, "I'm sure she isn't on the Double Circle. But I'm gamblin' that that big fellow knows about her. When you told him she was gone I was looking him in the eye. I saw it flicker."

"We can't pin it on to him."

"I'm figuring," the Kid reflected, "that while Harkey Burns was gabbing in the yards, her comin' out and sayin' you wasn't home, some of his men who'd hid their nags, crept into the house and waited for a chance at her. There weren't no locked doors busted in or windows broken."

"We've got to find her," Ross Talbot moaned.

"I'll be finding her," the Kid grunted, "An' who's got her will be payin'. Same as who had Bart killed will be payin'."

He didn't know how soon he would find Letty Talbot!

COME daylight again, the Kid remembered Queenie. He couldn't be bothered with her now. Couldn't take time to smuggle grub to her even though she had that crazy notion to hang around waiting for him. Alone he crossed the range to the old shack.

When he reached for the door clamp he jerked up sharp. It was in its hasp. He was sure he had left the door unfastened last time he came to the shack, to tell the girl he was letting her go. But now it was fastened.

He looked around. There was no doubt that riders had been there. His eyes were too keen to miss the signs. Yet there were no horses nor men in sight as far as he could scan the flat range.

With his gun drawn he jerked the hasp free and shoved in the door.

The sight that met his eyes brought an oath that filled the building.

On the floor, her mouth gagged, her feet bound, was stretched the white, almost unclad form of Letty Talbot. Bending over her, holding her body quiet, was Queenie, turned into a tigress. Livid welts across Letty's bare thighs and around her slender body under the lift of her little breasts, were eloquent evidence of the riata strap that Queenie still held in her hand.

When the Kid bounded in, the Bearcat girl straightened and laughed fiendishly.

"So you've found her! While I was waiting here for you, you were carrying on with this little plum? You turned me down, after stealing me, for this skinny heifer? Harkey Burns told me when he brought her here! He knew you had me. Nate Melhorn's men have been trailing you. They knew you'd come here to see me—and now you've found your pretty doll here."

The Kid sprang for her. He flung her across the room. She sprawled and her legs kicked, throwing her skirts about her neck. But she only laughed and sat up, without trying to cover her exposed legs.

"You can get her free," she gloated. "You can soothe the welts I gave her on your account. But you can't take her out. Listen!"

While the Kid was tearing the gag from the bound girl's mouth, he stopped to listen. The noise was unmistakable. He heard feet and bodies scraping down the roof overhead, where Nate Melhorn's men had been hiding, waiting for him.

He tore the wrist bonds from the moaning girl, then leapt across the room to Queenie, who screamed now. He gave her a smashing blow in the face

that put her out. At least she wouldn't be of help to the attackers from the outside.

Pulling Letty into the corner, he rolled Queenie's limp, full-fleshed body over her slender one. "Lie still," he commanded. "Don't let them shoot you."

Letty moaned his name. "They'll kill you. Let them take me. They'll turn me back if Dad gives Nate the range he wants."

For answer to that plea, the Coyote Kid's gun belched fire. A form that had leapt into the door frame, its own gun searching and screaming, tumbled into the room, doubled up with a groan, and then lay quiet. The Kid's gun spoke again and another blasting gun was silent, its owner falling away to the outside, gripping at his lungs.

The gruff voice of Harkey Burns sounded outside.

"Stay away from the door, you damn' fools. Wait till Nate comes with the horses. Then we'll burn the shack over their heads, if the rat won't come out with hands high."

BURN them out! The Kid knew they could do it. They would get him of course, but what about the girl? He knew what a woman could mean to a man, but he didn't want Letty Talbot to mean those things to Harkey Burns.

On his stomach now, he figured from the sounds outside, where Burns or one of the others would be standing. He crawled around the room until his head was at the door jamb. They were watching shoulder high for any dash he might make. They weren't watching the ground. He got two slugs going before he had to jerk his head and shooting arm back.

One found the big figure of Burns and twisted him around, pawing at his shoulder. The other got a Circle Bar blackleg who stood ten feet from the door. From the glimpse he had, the Kid decided there were only two or three left, but still enough to burn Letty and himself out, if he didn't stop them.

The girl was pleading to him again. Outside someone cursed. "She'll do more moanin' than that when Nate gets here, seein' Harkey laid out."

The Kid would use no woman's body as a shield. Even a coyote wouldn't do that. Not even Queenie's. But he'd resort to a similar trick. Watching the door like a cat, he slid over to where Queenie lay, shielding Letty from stray bullets. He picked her up as easily as he had at the Bearcat and carried her to the door. He called out.

"I'm sending the red skirt out to you jaspers. I don't want to be bothered saving her from your flames. Here she comes."

There was quiet outside. He stood the unconscious Queenie on her feet in the doorway, careful to keep himself out of range from any point outside. He pushed her and she toppled over on the ground outside.

While the two ambushers out there still were staring at the unmoving form, wondering, they were caught off guard. One was on either side of the door, hugged against the shack walls, but the Kid leapt out, like a coyote would leap, sudden and sure. His iron barked twice, at both ends of a sweeping arc. Two other guns, those at the ends of that arc, belched in unison, but the Kid's slugs had spoiled their aim. Both the blacklegs were down, writhing in the dust.

The Kid brought the clinging white body of Letty into the open. His horse was nowhere to be seen, but he figured he could run for it.

And then, around the house, rode

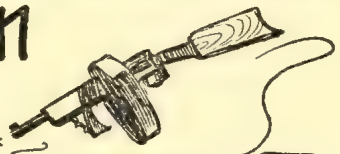
(Continued on page 101)

Polly of the Plains

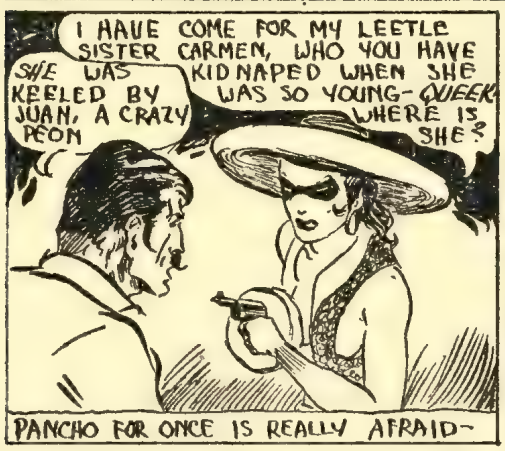
POLLY AND JEAN HAVE FALLEN INTO THE HANDS OF A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN BANDIT, SEÑORITA DIABLO. SHE OFFERS THE GIRLS LENIENCY IN RETURN FOR THE TRAIL TO PANCHO'S HIDEOUT.
• • •
IT SEEMS THAT SHE HAS AN EVIL MISSION TO PERFORM
• • •
DUSK IS FALLING
I THEENK YOU TWO HAVE LEAD ME ON ZE WILD GOOSE-CHASE.-BAH! YOU AMAIRICANOS-I THEENK I WEEL GET REED OF YOU!
NO! NO! THERE IT IS.-I SEE A LIGHT IN ONE OF THE SHACKS

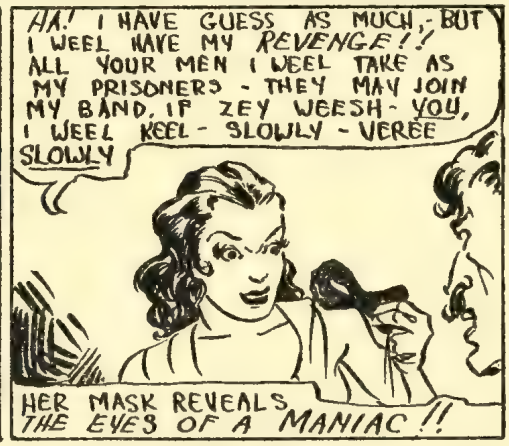
CARAMBA! YOU ARE CORRECT, QUEECK! GET ON ZE HORSES— PEDRO!-SANCHO! GET ZE MACHINE GUNS READY!-AT LAST WE HAVE FOUND ZAT RAT
OOH!-MACHINE GUNS!

MACHINE-GUN STRATEGY



JOSEPH SOROLY


I HAVE COME FOR MY LEETLE SISTER CARMEN, WHO YOU HAVE KIDNAPED WHEN SHE WAS SO YOUNG-QUEEK WHERE IS SHE?
SHE WAS KEELED BY JUAN, A CRAZY PEON
PANCHO FOR ONCE IS REALLY AFRAID-


AH! I HAVE GUESS AS MUCH,- BUT I WEEL HAVE MY REVENGE!! ALL YOUR MEN I WEEL TAKE AS MY PRISONERS - THEY MAY JOIN MY BAND, IF ZEY WEESH - YOU, I WEEL KEEL - SLOWLY - VEREE SLOWLY
HER MASK REVEALS THE EYES OF A MANIAC!!

AND YOU MY HANDSOME ONE YOU WEEL BE MY SWEET-HEART, YES?
OH! BUT I LOVE POLLY!
WILL KEN ACCEPT - OR REFUSE ??
SEE THE SEPT ISSUE FOR KEN'S ANSWER - WHAT HAS THE SEÑORITA IN MIND FOR POLLY AND JEAN ??—

FLAME OF THE

BY WALT CAREY JR.

Dan swung hard. His fist impacted against the siren's chin.

DAN WAYNE'S body stiffened. He had been through water-rights wars, cattle stampedes, tough fights—fist, knife and gun—and had once barely escaped a firing-squad when he was seeking excitement in a minor Mexican revolution. He had broken hundreds of outlaw killer horses, and had helped to defend an American Border town against a raid of the notorious Gomez's Insurrecto bandit army. But now, for the first time in his eventful life, he felt almost frightened.

He stared at the paper on the desk of the bank president. It was a deposit slip. At the top was Dan Wayne's name.

BORDER

Dan Wayne felt a little too flattered, when the famous Dolores smiled on him, to be cautious. And when a man's just inherited a lot of money, it pays to seek a reason for a woman's ways!

In the column headed "Dollars" were the numerals, 25,000.

Twenty-five thousand dollars! The figures jigged before his eyes. But there wasn't any doubt about it. This money was his, all his. An uncle dying in Lincoln County, New Mexico, had left it to him.

"So that's why I sent for you to lope into Hondo, Wayne," Tom Courtney ended up, as he handed over a pass-book and a check-book filler. "Longhorn" Courtney, as he was called, was president of the Stockmen's Bank of Hondo, Texas.

He shook his graying head. "This almost proves that thrift talks are all wrong. You raise hell, you don't save a cent, then your uncle dies and his attorneys deposit all this to your account. Scand'lous! Well, I'd suggest you leave it rest right here, kid, till you buy yourself a good spread an' set yourself up for life."

"This is where it'll rest, all right!" Dan said with conviction. "My foolish days are about over, Mr. Courtney.

Me, I'm settlin' down, gettin' me a ranch. Might even hitch up in double-harness."

"One way to get rid o' your dinero—that last idea," Courtney said wryly. Old Tom liked women, even was known to like a wife occasionally, but not his own. He was a settled bachelor. "But that gal I've seen you with from time to time—Jed Kersey's daughter—she'd be the kind I'd pick out if I was doin' anything loco like that."

Dan nodded. He had much the same idea. But auburn-haired Fay Kersey had never given him much of a play, had regarded him as too festive an hombre to take seriously.

Dan stood up. "I ain't drawin' a cent for the present," he said.

Courtney smiled. "All the better for you, waddy. Good luck, younker."

"This here good luck's enough to do me for life," Dan flung over his wide shoulder as he walked toward the door. *"Adois, amigo."*

HE ran into a new piece of luck, however, before he had reached the end of the main street on his way to Red River Canyon, where he had been living in a one-room shack.

The new piece of luck was perhaps twenty years old, but had the mature development and sophisticated eyes of a worldly woman of thirty-odd. She was Dolores Villareal, who since she had settled outside of Hondo a few months before, had knocked the little Texas cowtown on its ear.

Named for sorrow, Dolores might have been a daughter of joy, but not in the ordinary sense. She lived in a cabin off the Red River Road. Ordinary punchers and miners admired her with covetous glances—but Dolores Villareal, the flame of the Border, was not for such as they.

Big ranch-owners, wealthy tourists, Tom Courtney of the Hondo Bank, and a millionaire mine operator were among the men who had stabled their horses in the seductive señorita's lean-to outside her little cabin. The United States Government, it was said, had just missed capturing Pedro Gomez, notorious Mexican bandit, because he had used Señorita Villareal's cabin for a hiding-place. After Gomez had escaped to his mountain retreat, he had humorously given it out that he preferred the soft, warm arms of the Flame of the Border to the cold, steely arm of the Law.

Fate, her capricious loveliness, and her own impetuosity had made her a glamorous figure. An hombre might buy her champagne all evening, and never get so much as a smile from her jet-black, almond-shaped eyes. But on the other hand, if Dolores liked the way a humble waddy wore his sombrero—she would turn a cold shoulder to her wealthier suitors. Dolores had moods.

Obviously she was in one of her moods to-day, for she greeted Wayne with a dazzling smile as she pulled up her horse and leaned from her side-bar buggy.

Dan Wayne's strong-featured face showed his surprise. Once, a few weeks before, he had lifted his sombrero when he passed her and wished her *"Buenos dias."* And on that occasion Dolores had given him a blank stare. Now it was she who was the aggressor.

"Ah! Señor Wayne!" she said. "Thees ees some luck! I have been hoping to meet you these three days."

The sheen of her passionate black eyes and the flash of her even, white teeth against blood-red lips sent his pulses racing. His glance swept over the olive skin of her rounded arms and the shadowed cleft of the voluptuous breasts. The señorita's sleeveless, low-

cut gown was daring for Hondo, Texas. But the señorita herself was daring. No one knew better than she that nearly every male reformer who had talked scathingly of her would have crawled on his hands and knees to her cabin and then remained kneeling for the kind of smile she was giving Dan now.

Wayne had yanked his cayuse to an abrupt stop. He had whipped off his hat. "I didn't even reckon you knew my name, señorita."

"Ah! You Americanos! Een some ways you can be so like the leetle cheeldren!"

Dolores adjusted a flower stuck in her midnight cloud of hair. She had Mexicanized the Camille-like vogue of wearing red flowers and white flowers at different times. To-day, Dan noticed, the flower was a white yucca blossom. He thrilled as he followed the sensuous movement of her rounded arm. This woman of fire had set him aflame.

"You leeft the sombrero to me, one day," the señorita went on, "and me, I do not smile. You theenk eet ees because I do not choose to smile, eh? But a woman has the reasons—a woman—like me. Eet ees because my so-reech admirer, Señor Bates, the owner of the beeg rancho, ees looking. He ees a fat, horreed old peeg. But he has much money."

Dan Wayne's pulses were dancing.

"And now Señor Bates he say few days ago he like to buy me the nice saddle-horse. He say he weel buy from you because you have trapped and gentled so many of the wild horses. Pairhaps I buy from you direct, eh? Then I tell heem I pay more—much more—than I really pay. We make money together, eh?"

Dan's ardor was ebbing a trifle. This primitive creature with the exquisite body and probably no soul was merely maneuvering to use him. But her next remark sent his blood bubbling again.

"Would eet be against your principles to come to my cabeen, and have the glass of wine weeth me—and the talk? Rather, shall I say the social veeseet? One gets tired talking weeth fat, old men."

Her languorous gaze swept over Dan's tall, stalwart form. "I seem to be een one of my—my moods, to-day. Our veeseet weel be pleasant, for me, I am sure. For you—*quien sabe?*—pairhaps also pleasant. You are not een a hurry? You have the time?"

Her smile widened invitingly, and Dan felt his temples throbbing. The expression in those velvety, Latin eyes was unmistakable. He had seen just that expression in women's eyes before.

"Señorita," he said, "I got all day."

"*Bueno,* my beeg *vaquero.* I shall turn the buggy around and drive back. I must bathe and change the gown, for someone I like, and I shall make cold the wine een the *olla* of water. You weel be deescreet, my beeg *vaquero.* Ride off the road. Come to my back door een just one hour. You promees?"

"I promise, all right!" Dan said.

His pulses were sledging away.

AS HE tethered his pinto horse in the lean-to back of the cabin, Dan Wayne felt as fluttery as he had felt on his first quest of romance more than ten years before. Did this surprising invitation just mean that the flaming Dolores had learned in some way of his good fortune? How could she have learned so soon? But even so, this was the Flame of the Border on whom he was calling to-day. Did anything else matter? He had plenty of money now, he could be generous with a check and still have a fortune left. He was winner, he felt, no matter what happened.

With light feet he climbed the steps

of the little rear verandah, or *galeria,* with its railing of crooked dried mesquite posts. The women of the dance-halls held little interest for him. Yet love could be sweet—if the lover was the amazing, exotic Dolores Villareal.

The door opened softly as he reached it. Wayne entered a curtain-shaded room, a room carpeted with brightly-designed rugs of fine Mexican wool, almost like silk. On a wicker table was a bottle of champagne cooling in a red-earthen *olla* partly filled with spring water. On a shelf was an assortment of red, orange and brown Mexican pottery. But Wayne did not waste his glance on the room or its appointments. He caught his breath gaspingly.

Dolores stood before him, an inviting smile on her sensuous mouth. An elaborate robe of flowered silk partially draped her sinuous figure. The filmy material screened the detail but not the contour of her full, widely-set breasts, and clung to accentuate the incurve of her slender waist. The rounded, tapering, silken-sheathed legs were exposed. The small feet were encased in scarlet mules.

Dolores quickly shoved the door shut, and bolted it. She turned and walked back—weaved, or glided, rather—toward Dan. The cowboy stood there, fascinated at the glimpse of those full, arrogantly-angled breasts, that sinuous, brazen swing of the Border beauty's hips. She extended her hand with the gesture of an empress. "One has to cater to my moods," she said coyly. "You may kees my hand—first."

Wayne grabbed it and pressed his lips hungrily to the warm fingers, then to her palm. He felt wild with choked emotion.

Dolores leaned forward. Her moist, red lips parted. Dan's arms went around her as he clamped his eager mouth to hers. He kissed her passionately, bruisingly. Her lips almost seared him. He felt her warm, throbbing, perfumed body beneath the filmy siken robe. He felt her heaving breasts against his chest. And suddenly he felt something else!

It was the hard muzzle of a pistol jabbed into his back. He heard the low, sibilant command: "Up with the hands —*pronto!*"

DAN raised his hands above his head. Before making a fight of it, he wanted to see what he was up against. He had absolutely no chance. The slightest challenging move would mean that his kidneys would be blasted out of him. Wayne was a desperate fighter, but he fought with brains as well as with weapons and fists.

"Turn around—weeth your hands up!"

Dan turned. He heard the mocking laugh of Dolores, and his blood seethed in anger. But he almost forgot his rage in his surprise.

A little lemon-colored man, possibly five-feet six, stood before him with an automatic aimed at his heart. Dan stared at the saffron face, the small mustache, the dead-black eyes that glittered like a snake's. He had seen pictures of this man. So had nearly every newspaper reader in the United States. There was no doubt about it: In spite of the new mustache and the American cowboy clothes, this was the notorious Pedro Gomez, who once had evaded the authorities by hiding out in this Border siren's cabin. Gomez might have been forty-five or a trifle more. His once jet black hair was slightly threaded with gray. The Mexican smiled; rather, he grimaced. The hard mouth under the wispy mustache writhed in a sneer, but the black eyes did not change expres-

sion. With his automatic he motioned Dan to a chair, plucked the .45 from the cowboy's belt. "You know who I am?" the bandit asked. He used Spanish.

"Yep, I'd know that c'yote-lookin' face o' yours if I seen it in hell."

"You may see it there some time. You will be in hell before me," Gomez said in Spanish again. "And unless you want to be shot at once, speak in the only language worth speaking. Use Spanish. You know how."

Dan recalled Gomez's reputation, his hate for Americans and pure-bred Castilians. Gomez was a *mestizo*. His Indian blood showed up in the stoic cruelty of his face.

"All right, same in Spig, then," Dan said using Spanish, which he spoke equally as well as English, perhaps even more carefully. "I was saying that I'd

Helplessly, Dan watched Pablo bend over the unconscious girl.

know that scrofulous, jaundiced face of yours anywhere. You get this wench of yours to lure me here, so you can get the drop on me when my back is turned. You needn't go into that. I know all that. But what the hell do you want of me?"

A second man, typically Mexican, had come out of another room. He held a gun on Wayne while Gomez rolled a cigarette, got it going, inhaled deeply and blew out a ribbon of smoke. His nostrils expanded and contracted like the gills of a fish.

"One time," he said, "Pedro Gomez was mighty. He would not bother with a paltry twenty-five thousand dollars. But times have changed. The sum will now make me happy for a time. It will balance some of the misery which Fate has dealt to me."

Wayne smiled inwardly. So this was it. In some way, Gomez had learned of his inheritance, probably believed that like so many Westerners who lived alone and had a distaste for banks, he had the money hidden in or near his shack and could be tortured into disclosing its whereabouts.

"You can forget about that twenty-five thousand, Dog-face," Dan told him. "It's in the bank, every cent of it."

Gomez smiled mirthlessly. "Of course," he said. "That is a safe place for it—until you buy my ranch."

Dan stared. "You pulled this trick—to sell me a ranch?"

GOMEZ shrugged his shoulders and showed his teeth again. He had very good teeth for a man of his age. They flashed in the curtain-gloomed room. "It is the high-pressure American salesmanship."

The second Mexican saw no humor in the phrase, but Dolores, who had pulled the robe carelessly about her luxurious curves and was now lolling on a chaise-longue back of Gomez, laughed metallically. "I weel at least explain," she said, "why we knew—"

"In Spanish," Gomez snapped.

Dolores switched to that tongue, and went on: "You see, night before last, Señor Courtney of the Hondo Bank made one of his visits to me. He drank wine. He talked much foolishness with his loosened tongue. He mentioned that you had inherited the money and that it was waiting in his bank for you."

She spoke coldly, swivelling an occasionally languorous glance at Gomez. She was true to type. She would destroy one man for love of another. "And the following night—that was last night—I invite him again. He comes running. This time I have arranged to have him meet our agent." She gestured toward the stoic-faced Mexican near the doorway. "My agent tells him of the tremendous bargains in Mexican property right now, tells him of his valuable, well-stocked hacienda worth a great sum which he would sell at twenty-five thousand dollars, a fraction of its value."

"But I don't understand," Wayne said. "If you folks have a bargain like this, why do you—"

"Ah! But there is really no ranch," Dolores cut in. "We could figure no way to victimize the old one. But you will now hand over to Pedro your check for twenty-five thousand dollars. You have the reputation of being an impetuous young fool. You might buy a ranch in Mexico. So when our agent presents the check for twenty-five thousand dollars, Señor Courtney, who has been prepared, will see nothing suspicious in it. And when the cash is delivered, my loved one and I will flee over the Border, and you will at least have your life."

Dan Wayne was trembling with rage.

"If I could get my hands on that neck of yours, I'd wring it like a chicken's, you damned Border blister!" he raved.

Dolores laughed again. Her teeth looked very white and sharp. "Many men would like to get their hands on this neck—and on other parts of me. But—"

Gomez turned on her angrily. "Get out, Vain One!" he snarled. "Take the *olla* to the spring and return with fresh water for the tequilla. I will negotiate this business."

Dolores, pampered pet of wealthy men, seemed amazingly submissive to the commands of this wispy, yellow-faced killer. She got up quietly, took a stone *olla* from the shelf, and glided out through the back door.

"There has now been enough talk," Gomez said. "Pablo will get you the pen and ink, and you will write the check." He added with a tricky smile: "You will write a genuine check, with no embellishments in your signature. Fortunately, your riotous habits aid me. I have some very good copies of your signature."

He tossed several slips of paper on the table next to Dan. Dan groaned inwardly. They were tabs signed by him and left at several of the Hondo bars. Obviously the seductive Dolores had induced the bartenders or proprietors to give them to her.

"You won't get a damned centavo!" Wayne snarled.

"No?" Gomez's black eyes held triumphant gleams. "There are ways of forcing gringos."

"Not this gringo, you yellow-faced whelp! You'll kill me. Go ahead. I'd as soon be dead as without that money. And if you think torture—"

"Ah! Torture!" Gomez was grinning wolfishly. "Draw the curtain, Pablo. Expose our surprise for this stubborn gringo."

Pablo, the dead-pan Mexican, crossed to the left. The cabin consisted of two rooms and what appeared to be a sort of alcove. He swept back the curtains. Dan's eyes goggled. He started to curse, but his throat was dust-dry.

Lashed to an elaborate, red-counterpaned couch, and gagged with a bright Mexican scarf, lay a girl. She was young, lissome, rather long-legged for her medium height. Her legs were exposed from just below the rounded hips to the cruelly-thonged ankles. The slender arms were tied behind the girl's back so tightly as to make her young firmly lifted breasts point slightly outward. Her slip had been torn, and one ivory skinned globe peeped through the rent in the skimpy garment.

Dan's gaze swept her delicate features, the white skin, and that luxuriant thatch of short auburn hair.

"You see, we come all prepared," Gomez chortled. "You have been seen much with this señorita. Perhaps now you would write the check, rather than see her—harmed—here before your eyes."

Dan's glance flicked from the almost nude form of Fay Kersey to the dead-black eyes of Pedro Gomez and that other sinister eye—the eye of Gomez's pistol.

His heart was thumping wildly. He knew Gomez. Writing the check and getting it cashed would not save himself from death and Fay from even a worse fate. Once the check was cashed, he, Dan Wayne, would be killed, and Fay would be "harmed."

"You got me," he said dolefully. "Let your man bring the pen and ink."

If he was to have any chance at all, he figured, it would be while Pablo was getting the pen and ink.

GOMEZ snapped a quick command to Pablo. The latter nodded, recrossed the living-room and entered a room at the right. And in that instant, Dan took his desperate gamble.

"I'll write the check," he said calmly, "if you agree to—"

He sprang like a panther, hit Gomez just below the knees. Gomez's gun roared and flamed, but the bandit had been knocked off balance by the heavier Wayne. The bullet zizzed past Dan's ear. The flash almost blinded him. But his big left hand was clamped over Gomez's gun-wrist like a vice. Dan wrenched sharply. Gomez groaned, writhed like a snake. The gun dropped from his hand, but he rolled over on it to keep the big cowboy from getting it.

Dan couldn't afford to waste an instant. He heard Pablo rushing out from the other room, and bounded to his feet, lashed out and paralyzed Gomez with a terrific kick in the belly, then leaped inside the nearby doorway and hit the rushing Pablo like a tornado.

Pablo, practically Dan's own size and weight, staggered, but he did not go down. He brought up his .45, but before he could pull the trigger, Dan's big, hard fist crashed against his jaw. Pablo hit the floor hard. The gun slipped from his fingers, slid along the wool rug.

Dan's knees buckled as he felt a terrific blow on the back of his skull. He whirled, groggily. The cat-footed Dolores had re-entered the cabin, had slugged him with the stone *olla*. She was raising the jug to crash it down again.

Dan swung hard. His fist impacted against the siren's face. Dolores crumpled to the floor. Beserk, Dan flung himself beside her. She screamed, but one of his hands was already at her throat. With the other he ripped the filmy robe to expose her exquisite body. But the sight of the half naked loveliness that had lured him here only angered him the more. His nails scratched the olive flesh of her shoulder. "Damn you!" he snarled. "I'll—"

He heard the scuff of a shoe back of him. He sprang up, but he was too late. Pablo's gun-barrel cracked over his head. He saw a thousand stars and constellations. Fiery pin-wheels whirled before him. Then he fell headlong over the almost nude form of Dolores Villareal.

HE regained consciousness with a throbbing head and a feeling of nausea at the pit of his stomach. He was tied hand and foot to something hard and warm. He was gagged. His body was jolting.

Dan tried to twist around, but his feet and hands held fast, and the effort sent pains down his back. It was dark, but he could see that he was tied on the back of his own pinto horse, and that Gomez was riding ahead, leading another horse, to which was tied a girl wrapped in a serape. To the right, and slightly to the rear, was another horseman that Dan assumed to be Pablo.

Dan peered through the gloom. He judged he was about three miles south of Hondo, for he could make out the shadowy bulk of a hill called the *Cerro del Amalgre,* just ahead. Once he had taken a fling at mining in this red hematite country, and he knew it was only a few miles above the Border.

Was Gomez taking him to Mexico? Anyhow, Dan Wayne had no illusions. Death would be at the end of this trail for him, doubtless death following horrible torture. And he could have no doubt of the fate in store for Fay Kersey. This demure little lady who had withheld even the lightest of kisses from him would go insane under the treat-

ment of the Gomez gang. The thought sent a shudder through Dan.

He still feigned unconsciousness as Gomez led the way down a deep ravine bordered on each side by rocks and sand, then switched to the right, left the ravine, and started down the slope of a box canyon. Down the steep, rocky side the horses went, picking their way slowly. At the bottom, Dan saw what appeared to be a deserted nester's shack, but Gomez rode past the little structure and turned into a small cave opening in the cliff, stopping a few yards inside the dark tunnel. Pablo dismounted and

"Up with the hands, Senor . . . Pronto!"

led Dan's horse into the cavern.

"They are not here yet," Dan heard Gomez say in Spanish. "Well, perhaps this gringo will follow orders now."

The bandit dismounted, strode over and tore out Dan's gag. He slapped his hand sharply across the cowboy's face. "Are you feigning unconsciousness, gringo?" he asked.

Dan made no reply. He kept his head lowered. Gomez slapped him across the face again, but Dan made no outcry. This would be nothing to the torture he would meet later.

He sagged in the saddle as Pablo cut his feet loose, and hoped to make another desperate bid for freedom if Pablo cut the wrist thongs to lift him from the horse more easily. But Pablo didn't cut the wrist thongs. He toppled Dan from the pinto, quickly rebound his ankles.

Dan's sharp ears were picking up everything that Gomez and Pablo were saying to each other in Spanish. He heard Fay sobbing as Pablo cut her leg bonds to lift her from her horse. The big Mexican handled her with ease, soon had her trussed up again and laid her on the ground near the opening of the cave. From the speech of his captors Dan learned that Dolores had been left behind when he and Fay had been sneaked out of the siren's cabin late that night, lashed to their horses and taken toward the Border. Dolores would rejoin Gomez in Mexico when the twenty-five thousand dollars had been paid over. Gomez seemed confident that it would be paid.

Pablo lighted two stubs of candles and stuck them in the necks of empty tequila flasks. Dan hoped that the two Mexicans might have more tequila, might get drunk. But there was no drinking.

He peered over toward the entrance of the cave. Gomez had wrapped himself in a blanket and apparently was sleeping. He groaned now and then. Evidently that terrific kick in the belly had done him no good. Pablo remained standing in the front of the cave, on watch—until the snores of Gomez echoed through the little cavern.

Dan tensed as he saw Pablo sneak cat-footedly toward Fay Kersey. He saw the Mexican pull aside the girl's serape, while he let his eyes lick over the swelling breasts, one of them still completely exposed by the torn slip. One of Pablo's big hands was at the girl's throat. Fay was gagged, Dan believed, but Pablo was taking no chances on her moaning. His other arm went beneath her and lifted her limp body.

Dan writhed inwardly, but decided not to yell out until Pablo's later actions might make it necessary. His one piece of luck, he believed, had come when Gomez had torn the gag from his mouth. His one hope was that some cowboys returning north from a night of revelry in some Border cantina might ride within earshot. Then he'd bellow a leather-lunged call for help. Yelling now would be against the interests of both Fay and himself, unless Pablo—

He found it hard to keep silent as Pablo strained the girl's helplessly trussed form against him. In his impatience he had released her throat and was caressing her.

Gomez was snoring now. Pablo was lowering his brown face toward the girl's. His mouth roved over her throat. He raised his head and looked sneakily over at his master. Pablo was breathing very hard. The candle-light brought out the bestial gleams in his eyes, and Dan was about to yell out when Gomez ceased snoring, turned over, and then sat up. "What do you there, Pablo?" he spat out fiercely in Spanish.

Pablo leaped to his feet. His face in the candle-light was a blend of disappointment and fear. His tone was whining, servile: "The serape did not seem warm enough, señor. I thought perhaps I should wrap her also in a blanket."

"You lie, Pablo!" Gomez snarled. "Leave that one alone. She is for me—first for me. Lie down. Sleep."

"*Si, señor.*" Pablo rolled himself in his blanket again, and slept—or appeared to. The girl was safe from him, for the time being.

And the middle-aged Gomez, Dolores' lover also slept, but fitfully. Dan was rather proud of that terrific kick he had dealt the wispy little Mexican bandit.

AN hour or so after dawn, Dan heard Gomez ordering Pablo to go to the cabin and cook breakfast. Pablo returned some moments later, and reported that breakfast was ready.

"Carry the gringo in," Gomez ordered. "I will take the girl."

He got up, lifted the petite little prisoner, one arm beneath hers, the other under her knees, and started out of the cave.

Pablo kicked Dan in the ribs, then started dragging him like a sack of meal toward the cabin. He dumped him on the dirty floor. Then the two Mexicans noisily ate their meal. It consisted of *olla podrida,* a Mexican stew made with scraps of meat and chilis. The prisoners were not fed.

Dan lay on the dirty floor. He was thinking hard as he saw his captors guzzling the watery stew from shallow pans. He groaned loudly.

Gomez leered over at him. "You see you are still a prisoner, gringo," he said. "You have no chance—unless you write that check."

"That food smells good," Dan told him. "I'll make a bargain. Give me some of the stew. I might write it then. I am weak."

Gomez ladled out some of the stew into a shallow pan. Most of the bits of meat had been eaten. The dish was little more than smelly, greasy, warm water. He put the pan on the floor. "You can stick the nose in it—like the pig," he said, as he went on guzzling.

He looked at a silver watch. "You have no choice, gringo. My patience may come to an end. But if you sign the check now, you will be doing a wise thing. It is now after eight o'clock. I start Pablo to Hondo with the check as soon as you have signed it. He will be at the bank when it opens."

Gomez's tone was eager as he went on: "As Señor Miguel Quesada, a Mexican ranchero, he had already established his identity with Señor Courtney. You will write your real signature, which I compare here with the other signatures. There will be absolutely no question. The check will be cashed. Pablo will be back here with it before ten o'clock. We will start for the Border then, but I will loosen your bonds so that well within an hour you may struggle free and liberate the girl. Very simple. It is so little for so much."

"Life is better than money. I can see that now," Dan said in a resigned tone. "Untie my arms, so that I can make out the check."

"Pablo will untie them," Gomez said. He pulled out his automatic. "Any attempt to get free will do me out of twenty-five thousand dollars—and do you out of your life," he added.

DAN was lifted to a straight-backed chair beside a slivery pine table. Pablo undid his arm-bonds while Gomez held the gun on him. Then Gomez placed the new check-book on the table,

(Continued on page 98)

HOODOO

When the vigilantes got together, they thought of justice, vengeance—everything except the safety of a single girl. But it didn't matter to Grimes that her father had been a rustler.

"Quit it!" he snapped. "Any gent that paws a lady that way in public ain't no gent!"

TOWN

BY E. HOFFMANN PRICE

THE blue roan gelding pricked up his ears and gained fresh life as his tall, gangling rider reached the outskirts of Skeleton Creek. The horse smelled water and stables, and knew that the heart-breaking ride from Kansas was over; knew that the saddle bags, heavy with nine thousand dollars in gold, would soon leave his sweat caked flanks. But Simon Bolivar Grimes anticipated more than food and rest.

He was thinking of Melinda Patton. His coffin shaped face relaxed in a boyish grin, and he seemed strangely young to be wearing a bone handled .45 with enough notches to give a buzz saw a start in life. And then he saw the red haired girl in the doorway of the Corkscrew Inn, the biggest and best of the town's eleven saloons.

Her spangled bodice was low-cut and nicely filled, and to enhance her fascinations, she was leaning against the jamb in a way that flared out the generous curve of her hip. The evening breeze, stealing down the dusty street, played tricks with her short skirt, which coquettishly revealed glimpses of whiteness as it whipped over her knees. She started; then the dance hall smile changed to something warmer when she recognized the dusty rider.

"Simon—so you got back?" She heard the tinkling gold in the saddle bags as he reined in. "But where's the cowpokes? Ain't heard any shooting, or yelling, like when trail drovers get back to town."

"I done left them at Cross Plains."

Her eyes widened. "You idiot! Wonder you wasn't held up."

"I was, twict," admitted Grimes, wheeling his horse.

"Oh." Sally allowed that another couple of gents had made the error of thinking he was awkward with a gun, just because he always seemed on the verge of stumbling over his own feet. Then she invited, "Light and have a drink, honey."

He shook his head. "Kain't—not now, Sally."

The red head made a moué, then taunted, "Honin' to see Melinda so bad you can't even stop fo' one little drink?"

He spurred the roan, and a moment later, he was dismounting at the office of the express company, at the further end of the street. There he drew two heavy buckskin pokes from his saddle

bags, and routed out the crusty old night clerk, Lafe Simmons.

Lafe gave him a receipt for the money, flung it into the ponderous safe, and locked it up. Then he demanded, "Simon, whut y'all got in that passel on yore back?"

Grimes reddened, and blurted out, "A guitar, ef its any of yo' dang business."

He left his horse at the livery stable, got a fresh mount, and then went to the Drover's Tavern, next door to the saloon. Sally was no longer at the entrance. Half an hour later, he was back on the street, his long face scrubbed clean, and the fuzz hacked from his chin. The guitar still hung from his shoulder.

Once out of the city limits, he took the instrument from its case and twanged a few chords from *La Paloma.* Wouldn't Melinda get a thrill, being romantically serenaded!

"Mighty dang good," he conceded, "considerin' I learned it all in a week."

Maybe it would have been sweeter if Lupe Romero hadn't had satanic eyes, legs that got lovelier the further the eye reached above her hose tops, and a hip wriggle that gave meaning to everything. She was the darling of Abilene, and Grimes' music lessons had thrice been interrupted by indignant lovers who wanted her kisses reserved for the town.

They had been buried with military honors, but Grimes prudently lit a shuck from Abilene. After all, he was going to marry Melinda Patton; and three killings a week, he reflected, counts up in a year.

A light was burning in Melinda's window. Dismounting, he twanged away at his guitar; and he sang in Spanish. It was like a yearling bull competing with odd, tinkling noises; but Melinda would lean out, any minute now—

Wham! A shotgun poured flame and whistling pellets into the yard. It was a wild blast; most of it peppered Grimes tethered mustang, for darkness made the shooting erratic. He took a dive for the shelter of the grindstone, guns blossoming in each hand as he howled, "Come out shootin', yo' gol-danged bushwhackin'—"

Then a woman screamed, "Simon—my God—I didn't know—"

IT WAS Melinda, her streaming hair gilded by soft lamplight. She still clutched the fuming shot gun, and her gasp of dismay lifted her lovely breasts against the lace work of a honeymoon gown that revealed every curve from her white shoulders to her shapely, substantial hips.

And then, clearing the sill, Grimes saw that Melinda's blue eyes were tear reddened. "Honey, whut's been the matter?" he demanded. She choked a sob, and for a moment her eager lips clung to his mouth as though she'd never take time for a breath. Every contour, flattening to his embrace, seemed of its own accord to seek him. For a moment he thrilled to the soft crush of thinly covered breasts, the warm clinging of her curving, undulant body. Then—

"Oh, Simon—I wish you'd stayed away," she gasped, breaking away. "I've been dreading your return—but I'm so glad to see you—"

"Uh—um—whut—the hell—" He stuttered. Women still puzzled him.

But being a man of action, he didn't try to figure it out. Instead, he took one stride toward the lamp and blew it out. Then he eased her to the spacious lounge and he kissed her until she quivered and gasped. He'd learned more than music from Lupe.

Melinda made inarticulate little sounds, and by the time his kisses left

her parted and gasping lips to creep down to her throat, they were both breathless.

Suddenly Melinda slipped from his arms, and thrust him away from her when he tried to regain his hold. "Simon, darling, I didn't know it was you singin' out there, so I fired. I was just all broken up. I can't marry you."

"Whut—us kain't get married—why—"

"No, Simon. The town's against me. I can't marry you, after your shooting Dad—"

"But—honey girl—listen—" His voice broke. "Yo' pappy was tryin' to git me. I couldn't—"

"I know you couldn't help it," choked Melinda. "Dad was stealing your uncle's critters—he was dead wrong—and you had to fire to keep him from killing you—but don't you see, it just wouldn't look right, us marrying."

"I thought we done settled that."

"We did, Simon. But while you were taking your uncle's herd to Abilene, I've been hearing things—"

"Who—?" He was on his feet, gun drawn.

"Women's whispers. Enough of that will get under the hides of all the men, your friends included. They'd back you if you committed murder, but friendship can't last long with their women folks back-biting you and me, morning, noon, bedtime, all the time."

"I don't give a tarnation-damn—"

She caught his hand. "Simon, you listen. Your friends'll be thinking I'm a no-good wench, marrying you after you killed Dad, even if 'twas his fault. You'll hear something, some time, accidental-like. There'll be more killings—"

"I like killings, every so often," he growled.

That stopped her, just for a minute. Then she sighed, hopelessly and went on, "The truth is—I love you—and hate myself for it. So I'm going—to my Aunt's spread in New Mexico—"

He stared, and for once his eyes did not brighten as they picked the sweet, white curves that glowed through that frail, revealing silk. "You mean it?" His voice was dry and monotonous.

Her eyes dropped. "Yes."

He turned and without a word hurdled the window. Then he picked up his guitar, smashed it on the pump handle, and kicked the pieces against the rain barrel. Then he recaptured his mustang, and galloped like a madman toward Skeleton Creek.

Get pig drunk with Sally. She liked him; she was awful nice, only he'd never done any more than maybe give her a pinch or a pat, and then buy her a drink when she pretended she didn't like it.

THEY were whooping it up in the Corkscrew Inn. All the horses for miles around were tethered at the hitching rack. Music blared, feet scraped; Grimes heard the riot from a distance. It jarred, and grated. He reined in his mustang, and sat slouched in the saddle, suddenly cold to prospects he had considered. But he entered town at a walk, stubbornly determined to carry on.

Then he heard new sounds: a yell, the squeal of panic stricken horses, stampeding from the hitching rack. A dull boom came from the express office, almost at hand. Gusts of nitrous smoke poured into the street, and men came tumbling out. They ducked into the side alley.

As Grimes spurred forward, they emerged on horse. It was a hold-up, and Skeleton Creek's mounts a-helling down the main street, in the opposite direction.

Grimes, lying along his horse's neck, hosed the raiders with lead as he charged to meet them. A man running from the

emptied hitching rack cut loose with a sawed off shotgun. Grime's .45 beat him by a hair. He pitched headlong, his weapon pouring buckshot into the harness-maker's window.

It was a short, deadly melee, with the lanky towhead's murderous gun spraying lead into the surprised bandits. Another, fighting his frenzied horse, sagged from the saddle; men came dashing from the Corkscrew Inn, guns blazing.

When the smoke cleared away, the raiders were hightailing it westward, and Grimes' horse, wounded, piled him in a heap before he could pursue.

Two bandits and a citizen lay sprawled in the gory street. Lafe Simmons, blood trickling from his ears, was done for; a tap across the skull had cracked it as effectively as dynamite had ravaged the iron safe. But for Grimes' unexpected return to town, the getaway would have been perfect.

HALF an hour later, Grimes was in the saloon. Skeleton Creek was on the war path, and the Sheriff and City Marshal were catching hell.

"That's the fo'th time Wells Fargo's been held up," stormed Amos Diggs, shaking the kinks out of his streaming white hair. "And by gravy, hit's got tuh stop!"

"It's a-goin' tuh kill business," raged hatchet faced Mel Hawkins. "The express company warned us, one mo' hold up, an' they jerks their office outen this town."

"Yo're damn' double right," chimed in the manager of the company, who had been routed out of bed by the riot.

Old man Diggs had the answer. "We'uns is organizing a Vigilante Committee, an' hang every owl hooter so high yuh kain't see the buzzards peckin' his eyes out. Belly up, gents and gargle!"

"It's on the house, gentlemen," yelled Lyman Byrnes, the red-faced proprietor of the saloon.

They all did so—except the disgruntled marshal, who had ridden hell-bent to get the sheriff from Skunk Valley. But that interested no one; Vigilantes would be the answer! No one could identify the fallen looters, but everyone was guessing.

"Me, I'm going to be a vig-gilanty myself," declared Grimes, downing another whiskey. "They got my uncle's nine thousand bucks afore I could git it into the bank in the mawnin."

The organization meeting was a roaring success, until some one took a notion to play rough with Sally, the red haired dance hall girl. When she left her room, she'd given them a fair start on account of the brevity of her costume; so the three amorous gents who wondered what made the sequins of her bodice sort of glitter and wobble every time she took a step didn't have heavy work, as far as garment went.

Sally screamed. It was getting to be more than frontier humor. Her hair was down over her white shoulders, and with both hands trying to hide her swaying, almost bare breasts and thrust away her playmates, she had no chance to protect her skirt. It came away with a short tearing sound.

Grimes, attracted from the bar by the ruckus, allowed that she did have nice legs, especially above her hose tops, where sleek thighs melted into the dainty concealment of her brief undergarment. Nearly all of Sally was nice, quivery and soft. So he grabbed her two tormentors by the shoulders and jerked them loose. They sprawled, each clutching a piece of the redhead's gown—which they dropped as they made a dive

"He's done for!" yelled Grimes. "Now duck—here they come a-shootin'!"

for their guns. Sally stumbled back, palms partially covering her shaking breasts.

There was a general scrambling for cover; but it stopped when Grimes' boot kicked the Colt from one gunner's hand, and side stepped the other's wild shot. There was no second. The boy's .45 smacked down across the fellow's head.

"Quit it!" he snapped. "Any gent that paws a lady thataway in public ain't no gent. An' ef'n I wasn't a law-abiding vig-gilanty, I'd of blasted yo' danged teeth out."

SO SAYING, he stalked to the bar, downed some more whiskey, and then gravely tottered to his room at the

Drover's Tavern. But he had scarcely kicked off his boots when there was a tapping at the door. Sally, wrapped up in a robe, slipped into the room, and didn't move away from him as he closed the door. All her make up had been removed; she seemed younger and softer, except for the hard little lines about her mouth.

"Simon, I'm so glad you came back to see me," she cooed, snuggling closer.

Whatever she wore beneath that sleazy robe couldn't have been made into more than two small handkerchiefs. Sally lifted generous lips and eager eyes; a warm feminine scent exhaled from between the blue-veined breasts that were crushed tantalizingly against him.

He was suddenly dizzy, and she helped him to a chair. "Gol dang this joining committees," he muttered, thickly. Then, long, sombre face propped in his hands, he stared at the dusty floor. Sally sensed that his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Simon," she whispered, "why'd you come riding back to town so sudden-like?"

"Shut up!" he barked. "Or I'll handle yo' wuss'n those jaspers down t' the saloon."

But Sally murmured sympathetically, and tried to brush the cow-lick out of his eyes. Then she said, "It's danger-out, Simon, you this drunk and a oil lamp right where you'd knock it down."

So to keep him from knocking over the lamp, she lifted his face with her hands, smiled, and sank onto his lap. Grimes laughed bitterly; he'd made a similar gesture, only an hour or so ago. This time, he did not repulse Sally. She was whispering endearments, clinging to him as he held to her for support. Her mouth was humid and persuasively tender, brushing over his lips and face and throat. And the tingles incited by those kisses sent his arms about her more determinedly. She was warm and yielding; her flesh was not as firm as Melinda's, but it was luxuriously silky and scented.

He was mortally weary, rather than just a bit too drunk. He was tired of everything . . . he thought it'd be nice to cushion his head on Sally's shoulder, but the touch of rounded breasts that were so thinly covered by Sally's robe, was a stimulant. She insisted on kissing him. So he humored her . . . especially as he couldn't keep his eyes from the gleaming skin of plump thighs, where her skirt had fallen back into her lap as she crossed her knees. And before he knew it, he was as thrilled and ardent as the girl who had so long wanted to exchange kisses with him.

He didn't mind how the room seemed to spin. He scarcely caught the significance of what Sally whispered in his ear as she nestled snugly in his arms: "Simon, those jaspers that took your money out of the safe are from Clovis—New Mexico.

"I heard two strangers—just afore the hosses stampeded—talkin' about Clovis. They were gone when the riot ended. But I didn't tell no one. Didn't have a chance, till later, an' then I allowed I'd let you know, private, so's you can get the credit yo'self. Now I got to go . . . and . . . don't be too worried about Melinda. . . ."

But when she wriggled out of his arms, he wasn't worried about anything. Battle and whiskey and Sally's kisses had combined to give him a sense of peaceful unconcern. To hell with everything. . . .

And down the street, drinks on the house kept the newly organized formed Vigilantes too busy to take up the trail. They were shooting out the lights.

Someone sang *La Paloma.* Grimes heard, cursed, but lay there. Finally his snores blended with those of the committee. . . . .

THE next day, the red eyed citizens were on the warpath in earnest. No more drinks on the house. And just as the posse was about to take the trail, Uncle Carter, gray and sour faced came galloping into town with the cowhand who had brought him the news of the robbery.

"Seems like to me," he growled, pulling up beside his nephew, "some skunk knowed you got here ahead of time. Warn't nuthin' else in the safe till you turned over that *dinero.*"

Grimes remembered that Sally had seen him, and must have heard the tinkling gold. No one else could have. And certainly no one could have anticipated his early return from Abilene. Then how account for the strangers and their carefully planned raid?

They rode all day, following blood splashes and hoof prints. Later, buzzards circling drew the posse to a horse that had dropped from wounds and exhaustion; and a peculiarly high heeled boot print clinched the lead: the raiders had passed this way. Sally's story was already verified—partially, at least—by the northerly direction of the fugitives.

Close to the New Mexico line, they found the smouldering remains of a stage coach. The driver, bullet riddled but doggedly hanging to what life remained, crawled out of the mesquite and muttered a few words: "We passed through Skeleton Creek, three-four hours after the hold-up—had thuty thousan' in gold—so we changed our route—but didn't do no good—gimme a drink—fer God's sake—"

He swallowed the tepid water, but he died before he could give any details. Yet his few words cast light on the past night's doings. The bandits apparently had been waiting for the stage, intending to trail it to ambush; and during their lurking, they had seen a chance to get Grimes' money, in addition to achieving their original objective.

Inside information, no doubt. Otherwise, they'd have expected the contents of the express safe to be loaded on the stage, and would surely not have made their daring raid in town.

Lyman Byrnes, mayor of Skeleton Creek and owner of the Corkscrew Inn, then and there offered five hundred in gold for the capture of whoever had comitted this new outrage. And the posse rode on spurred by vengeance, and the urge to appease the wrathful express company, whose station was what kept the town on the map.

THREE days passed. Three blistering, dusty, thirst-haunted days. Despite all arguments, Grimes persisted in his contention that the bandits had not ridden toward the Mexican Border.

"I got a hunch!" he asserted, stubbornly refusing to reveal his reasons. And Uncle Carter, though inwardly dubious, chipped in with his gun slinging nephew, which convinced the posse.

Late the next afternoon, his hunch was justified. After hours of scrambling over volcanic wastes—they were in the badlands now—they found that familiar, high-heeled boot print in one of the few patches of sterile soil. And that was the turning point.

Presently a horse scented water; one of the freaks in this savage desert. Men could be hiding out. And they had scarcely pressed on a mile when rifle fire blazed from a butte that towered up like a castle turret in that land of ancient fires.

A man dropped. The others took cov-

er as bullets droned like bumble bees over head. Grimes, protected by crevasses in the lava bed, ran hell bent, his uncle after him.

They emerged, just as the bandits came trooping down on the far side, the sortie disguised by the frontal fire which held the main party. Uncle Carter's .60 caliber buffalo gun poured one-ounce slugs into the flank of the bandits. Grimes, recklessly breaking cover, ducked in and out, a dancing jack in the box with each hand blazing. Lead raked him, but surprise made the enemy

fire wild. He emptied a saddle, and charged on, yelling.

Uncle Carter and Old Man Diggs were on his heels. Then the fire from the further face of the butte slackened, and leaden fury came pouring out to meet them. They were driven back, and soon they saw that it was a stalemate.

The bandits could not come out; neither could the posse close in and scale that steep cliff. But they had the enemy's horses, and the water hole as well.

That night, however, the odds were leveled. Rain pelted in drops as big as baseballs. The depressions and pockets in the butte must have collected enough water to float a boat. And by noon the next day, the bandits had gained a temporary advantage. Under cover of darkness, some of them had worked into sniping posts that commanded the spring; and that made it bad for the besiegers.

"Hell," growled Uncle Carter, "we kain't rush 'em. We're in owl hoot country, and fust thing we know, we're going tuh git ourselves bushwhacked by other sculpins. Simon, y'all ride to Clovis and tell the sheriff—"

"Like hell I will," protested the boy. "If the sheriff wanted to, he'da come out here afore now to smoke out these skunks. But I got a better one. 'Member that mine, way back yonder? Git some dynamite. An' some timbers—we kin fix up a cattypult and heave a passel of bombs up into the blow holes in that butte."

That was a good gamble; but Grimes refused to do anything as dangerous as hauling dynamite. Instead, he took a .45-70 and settled down to a sniping duel. He soon learned, however, that it was not like picking off squirrel, back home in Georgia. The hell glare of the desert kicked up heat devils and spoiled his aim.

Under cover of darkness, they devised the crude catapult that would hurl dynamite into the bandit's nest. They could hardly hope to blot them out with a . . . single bomb; but the terrific concussion, the gusts of nitrous smoke, the very shock and surprise of such a blast at the first gray of dawn, when man's vitality is the very lowest, would give the Vigilantes a chance to close in without suicidal odds.

THAT night, tongues of flame stabbed the gloom. The vigilantes, making a bluff at eagerness to smoke out the ban-

Wham! She poured whistling pellets at her serenader.

dits, were firing at every sound or sign of motion on the crest of the butte or its cavernous face. The trick was to keep the besieged on edge, expecting a rush that did not materialize. Then, when the shooting at last ceased, the bandits would relax, and their vigilance would slacken, giving the bombing device a chance to get close.

Grimes, whose post was well forward, heard a suspicious stirring. He slowly shifted, getting his .45 into line. The moon had not yet risen, and the wind distorted sounds, so that he had to hold his fire. From the pit at his left, a rifle blazed, and a slug spattered to bits some yards before him. A woman screamed. Grimes yelled, "Hold it—don't shoot!"

The Vigilantes broke cover. And then Grimes saw the huddle of white in the gloom ahead. It was a girl; the ivory blurr of her face, the fullness of her breast and the roundness of her thighs were plainly perceptible. He caught her in his arms and carried her to the cook's

fire, far to the rear, and behind a sheltering rock.

It was Sally, wearing what was left of a street dress. Her hands and arms were lacerated, and the jagged rocks had raked the tender flesh of her arms and legs. Thorns and mesquite had left her open-work blouse a sorry handful of shreds, and the scratch-reddened contours of full breasts were partially visible, even in the near darkness. She gasped, "They sent me—I was leaving town—I left on the stage, that night—"

"Yuh was caught in the stage hold-up?" demanded Old Man Diggs.

"Nice way you walked out o' my dance hall!" grumbled Byrnes. "Sarves you right. What'd you leave fer?"

"Hell!" growled Grimes, suspicion suddenly knitting his brow. "I bet she knew I had the money—"

Sally flashed Grimes a single imploring glance, and cut in, "I didn't! I was a prisoner! They sent me down here to bargain. They got another prisoner—Melinda Patton—"

Grimes' fists clenched. While he had been lying dead drunk in the Drover's Tavern, Melinda had been boarding the stage for Las Cruces. He turned on Sally and demanded, "Prove it!"

The redhead fumbled in the wreckage of her blouse, ignoring the eyes that caressed her half bared breasts. Then she found what she sought: a robin's-egg nightgown, wrapped about her waist. It had a lace inserted yoke, and right over the spot that would have centered on a well-shaped woman's heart were embroidered initials. But Grimes already recognized the garment.

"Let those bandits go," Sally said, "and they won't hurt her. But if you don't, they'll—oh, Lord, you know what they'll do—"

Grimes was on his feet, and saying, "They so't of got us. I guess we'll have to—"

"Like hell we will!" rasped Uncle Carter. "Ain't no cattle rustler's daughter going to make me lay off."

"Ner me neither!" chorused others of old man Patton's enemies. Melinda's father, unmasked, had been buried, but the indignation of the town still lived.

"Yo're a pack of skunks—yuh ain't men, jest skunks!" stormed Byrnes, unexpectedly taking Grimes' part. "Lettin' a pore gal in the hands of them renegades."

But the Vigilantes, wrathful and weary, many of them wounded, swamped the saloon keeper's generous impulse. Grimes, however, shouted them down: "Yo gol-danged buzzards, y' ain't goin' to heave no dynamite into that butte—" He whirled, jerking his gun; but before he could drive a slug into the cache of explosive, some yards away, Uncle Carter knocked his .45 out of line, and the shot went wild.

A rifle barrel smacked down across Grimes' knuckles, and the weapon dropped from his hands. Raging, he turned on his allies, but they overwhelmed him. Disarmed and kicked lop-sided, he was booted out of camp. "An' stay out!" howled Uncle Carter, "until you learns that a cattle thief's daughter don't count when justice and the welfare of Skeleton Creek is in the jack pot!"

"An' run that redhead out!" howled others. "She musta knowed that jug-headed kid had money in his saddle bags! She done tol' the owl hooters!"

GRIMES picked the cactus spines out of his hands and knees, and stalked cursing into the gloom. For two cents, he'd take the outlaw trail himself. He'd had hard luck ever since his arrival at his uncle's ranch. But he was unarmed,

except for a Bowie knife. His mustang was with the *remuda.* Maybe they'd let him take it, if he asked; but wrath and humiliation made him pause.

Why not creep back bushwhack the horse wrangler, get himself a mount and guns? To hell with Skeleton Creek, and Melinda as well; her dang fool notions about what people would say, was to blame for this sorry mess.

Maybe she could escape in the panic caused by the bomb. Then, thinking of her in the hands of those renegades, his aching head whirled. He was useless, futile, burned out by his own vain rage and helplessness.

He started, drawing his knife as he heard a sound from the side. A woman said, "Simon, it's me. I followed you."

It was Sally, and as she crept up beside him, she went on, "I didn't tell them! Honest, I didn't! I just left town, figuring I'd better, account I told you about those two fellows talking about Clovis. I was afraid if any escaped, they'd suspect and come back and kill me. Looks now, as if you and me ain't got a friend left. But maybe we can go somewhere."

"If I kin steal us a hoss," muttered Grimes.

They waited at the far side of a boulder some hundred yards or more from vengeful men whose voices rumbled in the gloom. Sally, shivering in the desert chill, snuggled against him for warmth. He slipped his leather vest about her, pillowed her head on his shoulder. She murmured, "Simon, there wasn't anyone in town that was ever nice to me. Somehow, I'm not worried, being with you."

Then, sensing even in the gloom that he was staring somberly at the ground before him, too dejected and beaten for thought of action, she ran her fingers through his hair, hungrily clung to his lips, murmuring desperate words into his mouth. "She don't love you, Simon —I was talking to her on the stage . . . she was all broken up, but if she really cared, she'da stuck with you."

"That's gospel, honey," muttered Grimes, warming to her friendliness. He drew her closer, felt the soft suppleness of her body, the luxurious yielding of her flesh as his embrace closed about her. She shivered as he kissed her, and breathed, "I've always loved you, Simon . . . couldn't you care for me, just a little?"

"Heaps, Sally," he answered, pulse hammering from the warm exhalation breathed into his ear. Loneliness had brought them close, but the redhead's throbbing breast and possessing arms were inflaming him, so that he forgot all but their own little corner of that black waste. "But maybe we kain't get to any town—maybe—"

"Nothing makes any difference," she sighed. "They can't take this minute away from us. . . ."

BUT when they finally slipped from each other's arms, Sally knew that her kisses had given Grimes more confidence than she had reckoned. That was when he said, very purposefully, "We been a pair of damn' fools, honey. They kain't prove you sold out the stage coach, or told anyone about my money. They was jest madder'n hell, an' you hadn't oughta blame 'em. And if you came down out of that butte, *I could sneak up it.*"

"Simon—" Her nails sank into his arm, and for a moment he felt her eyes stab him in the darkness. "You fool—you'll git killed—which is more'n is going to happen to that high nosed gal—she'll live through—"

"Shut up!" snapped Grimes, jerking

(Continued on page 112)

I CAN BE • HARD •

BY JAMES A. LAWSON

She didn't dare alibi her brother, even to get him out of jail! But Hard Guy had a few ideas about the robbery . . . and they caused plenty trouble.

I SHOOK my tailfeathers like a duck and got some of the water off. And then I sat down in the plush seat that had the stuffing bursting through the seams. I was wet and cold and almost broke, and this old, old-fashioned wooden day coach didn't improve my humor.

Some day, I told myself, me, Dallas Duane, the Hard Guy, was going to quit

"They got the satchel from her and shot the teller!"

this business of chasing oilfield booms.

They called this dinky train, that ran from Piney to the boom town of Petrol City, the "Roughneck Special." Partly because of the oilfield roughnecks that rode it; more, I guess, because the old track sagged, climbed and sunk its way through swamps thick with piny woods. Arkansas at its worst.

A rig builder drove a nail in the woodwork and hung up his hat; a "lady" paused, eyed me, and I scowled. She looked too shopworn for my sensitive tastes. The bell *"ding-dinged"* and protesting couplings took up slack. And just then, four big hams, even bigger and hammier than I, came down the aisle. One of them had a heavy satchel chained to his right wrist.

They sat down, after turning one seat to face the other, in a compact, quiet group.

A breath of perfume, a soft rustle of skirts, and I looked around. Was *she* the palpitating patootie! I moved over hopefully. Just then the train shuddered and lurched. This woman, with the fire-fomenting figure and the blonde hair,

squeaked a little, pawed for balance and caught my shoulder. She spun around as the Roughneck Special bucked again, and sat right down in my lap!

Was I mad? Was I insulted? Did I push her away? You know damned well, if you know me at all, I did *not*.

The part of her that was on my lap was gasoline on the fire of my imagination. Her back was to me as she sat there, and as she plopped down, I had opened my arms to receive her. They tightened around her now, and the yielding softness of her breasts made my arms quiver.

She wriggled around on my lap. I had a glimpse of dark silk stockings that Santa Claus never filled. He's not that good. And above the stockings, swelling into delicious, white curves, was the trunk of this tree that grew such delightful limbs. I turned and twisted my neck. My collar seemed too tight.

"Thank you," she said. "If you'll just let me go—"

"But I don't want you to go," I complained. "You've a lot of things in common with me—"

"You got your etchings *with* you?" She slipped off my lap to the space beside me. The seat was narrow and the warmth of her thigh, pressed against mine as we sat there, made me steam with ideas.

"No etchings. Just itchings," I cracked, and took her hand. The train dipped, swayed, creaked and groaned. Outside, a steady, miserable, cold rain fell unslackingly. Swamps and dripping woods dragged past.

I noticed this dame looking at the four men up toward the end of the car. She looked away quickly when she saw I noticed her. "Which one do you prefer?" I grumbled. "What they got that I ain't got?"

"A pa—What? Oh, nothing. You've got everything. I was wondering if you'll be in Petrol City long."

"Will you, baby?"

Her warm fingers squeezed mine and she gave a little wiggle as she snuggled against me. "Ummmm. Maybe. I—I'm working there. In a cabaret called Fatty's. Or a barrelhouse, if you will. I'm not—well, I'm a singer. An entertainer."

"I'll drop around and see you. I need entertaining."

FINALLY, after a couple years, the train was wheezing into Petrol City. It occurred to me to find out who she was. But she wasn't looking at me, or listening to me. She was looking past me, eagerly, out the window. And then glanced at those four men up ahead.

The train yanked to a stop in a hell of noise. Wagons, horses, men, women, yells and curses. Mud knee deep in the streets. The roar of gigantic wells blowing into open pits. And rain. Smells, tin-pan music, and smells. Lines of tents, shacks, log buildings. And more smells and mud and rain. You get an idea of Petrol City. Or do you?

The train was emptying, spilling hundreds into the hundreds around the depot. I reached over, got the little bag the dame carried and pushed her ahead of me.

"In case," I said, "you're interested, they call me Hard Guy."

"Hard Guy, I don't think you'd be hard enough. Let me have that bag."

"The boy friend, eh?"

"I didn't say."

We were on the mud-covered cinder platform now. She grabbed the bag and skittered away from me. I stood there in the shouldering crowd and watched her. There was a big, mule-sized gent standing at a corner of the depot. He looked tough and mean, and had the damnedest puss I ever glimmed. A flat nose, low

forehead, and a big mouth with heavy lips that stuck out like the bill on a duck.

He looked at the dame, and I thought I saw her nod twice. But he didn't speak to her, and he didn't appear to know her right then. He acted like he didn't want to be seen, and lost himself in the crowd.

"Well, and you finally got here! I knew you'd be along. How was Texas when you left?"

"Dry, where it wasn't wet. I wish I was back," I growled, recognizing the voice even before I turned and scowled at the swack before me. He grinned and blinked at me through his thick horn-rimmed goggles.

It was Specs Norton, a boom town news hawk. We'd teamed up, bumped into each other, got in each other's hair a lot before.

"Old Hard Guy, free-lance law, private dick, trouble-buster," Specs jeered. "There's nothing for you here—but private killings, murder, hijacking and more all-around hell than any boom I ever made before. And more rain than sandstorms in the Panhandle."

"Yah," I grunted, turning up my coat collar.

"And you get off the train, lugging the luggage of none other than little Donia Wade. I'm warning you, Hard Guy, donia wade in that pool. Duck Ildora claims little Donia for his own."

"A big duck-faced mug with a bull moose build?"

"Sure. Know him?"

"Don't figure to. But as long as I'm tagged with you, you can steer me to a snifter and tell me around."

We left the depot, went up to the hell of the main drag and paid a dime apiece to get hauled across the sea of mud to the other side. On a sled dragged by oxen. It was, according to Specs, a dull time of day. The workers weren't in from the fields, the swamps yet.

He steered me into a drugstore. Just a few shelves of epsom salts, aspirin and tobacco. And a fountain where the softest drinks were jake and corn whiskey.

I paid, and we had a snort and bellowed, above the noise of gas and din in the street, for another. I was raising it to my lips when—

"Bang!"

THERE was no mistaking it. That was a pistol shot. And there came a couple more on the heels of it. Specs dropped his glass, grabbed at it and drained what was left, and then took off with coattails flying, and me after him.

Up at the next corner, a crowd had gathered. I saw a sign on the shanty on the corner that proclaimed it to be the Oilwell National Bank. Specs dug through the crowd and dashed inside the place. I went along. There was a lot of confusion there. And gunsmoke hung thick and acrid in the air.

There was a girl there. I saw her first! She was small, with big, round blue eyes, honey-colored hair and a slip of a figure that was no slip on nature's part. Oh, no! She was backed up in a corner behind the cage, hands pressed to her mouth. An old, white-headed duck, president of this bank, Charles Garrett, was waving his arms and yelling for the law. I went around and looked behind the counter.

There was a weak-faced, thin-haired young fellow lying crumpled on the floor. Blood stained the white front of his shirt. His mouth was open, his expression one of accusation and complete overwhelming surprise.

"John Fay, the teller," Specs growled.

"The law! The law. Where the hell—" Garrett squawked.

A deputy sheriff, Ike Dort, with a

vacuous look, and a town marshal, Dill Root—they called him Dill Pickle—came trumpeting and storming in like bull elephants gone "must."

"Forty thousand," Garrett gobbled. "It was brought over on the train by four guards. Don't dare keep that much here all the time. But today is payday for some of the big companies. We always have it brought over like this. The guards went out, and then two men came in. All masked, with coveralls on. One was big, huge. One was snarling and tall. The money was right there in plain sight, in the satchel. Fay, there, hadn't put it in the safe immediately, as he always did. I don't know why. I don't."

He stopped for breath. Dill Pickle seemed to envy the men who'd made the haul. "Forty grand. Whew!" he groaned.

"Forty grand," Dort echoed.

Garrett stormed on. "Fay handed over the satchel without a whimper. And they shot him three times, then went out that side door into the alley. That door should have been locked! Oh, do something. This is going to wreck me. Two thousand dollars, make it three—"

"Going—going at four!" some wag yelled.

"Yes, four thousand for the recovery of the money," Garrett squeaked.

I pressed in close. "Was the money brought over by four men? One with the satchel chained on him? Was, huh? And there was no reason this Fay was plugged? Didn't resist? The side door was unlocked, and Fay failed to immediately lock the money in the vault. All that's right?"

"Who're you?" Dill Pickle growled suspiciously.

"A—a newspaperman. Specs will vouch for me."

"You must be a heavy drinker if *he* vouches for you."

"We'll get the man," Dort bawled and dashed out the side door. In a few minutes he was back, lugging a couple pair of coveralls and two bandana handkerchiefs with eyeholes cut in them.

"Found them in the alley," he yipped. "Where they dropped them." He and Dill Pickle began searching the pockets. Pickle gave a sharp cry and help up a strip of aluminum he'd found in one pocket. The kind you punch your name on after dropping a nickle in a slot. He showed it to Dort and they both lit out on the run.

I took one more look at the little blonde honey and went out with Specs. "Who's the baby?" I demanded.

"You would! When I've been making a play for her for two whole weeks. She's Grace Morgan. Lives in a little green house on the next back street. The only house with paint on it—for your convenience. But it's no use. She won't play."

"Maybe not. But after a while, I'm going to see her. Ask her questions. Oh, about this robbery and killing. I've got an idea, and I think I got a shot at this four grand reward."

"Lucky!" Specs snorted. "In this hole two hours, and you figure for that much yardage. What's the dope?"

"Wait'll we see whose name was on that tag," I hedged. "It sure looked like *too* much, leaving that in those clothes."

WE GOT the news three hours later. The cops had picked up a young guy named Lew Morton. He worked as a barkeep in Fat Stuff's place. Had a room in a joint next door. They'd found a money wrapper in his room, but no dough. They hunted three hours, before they pinched him, bleary-eyed with booze, and staggering up the street.

He couldn't, or wouldn't, tell where he'd been during the robbery. Said he

wasn't with anyone, and hadn't done it. So they slammed him around and landed him in the gow.

I left Specs in a drink emporium and went through the mud and rain to that green house on the back street.

There was something fearful in the way Grace Morgan opened the door. She was in robe and slippers, and barely came to my shoulder. Her blue eyes were red and wet with tears. She recognized me and shook her head.

"I've nothing for the papers," she said.

I pushed on in and shut the door. "I don't want a thing for the papers," I told her. "I want that reward. I want to know what you know. I don't think the coppers have the right guy."

She surprised me, then. "I know they haven't. They haven't!" And she broke out and started bawling again. I was the closest article to lean on, so she pressed against my chest, sobbing violently. I put my arms around her, and I had a fight of it to keep myself from hugging her. And was I puzzled at this tender, firm little armful.

"Lemme plug 'im, Duck!" Gus began. "Then we'll lam—!"

"You know they haven't, eh?" I pressed, holding her off. "How do you know?"

She jerked away from me. The robe flung open revealing the slim, curved length of her nearly bare body. I caught my breath. Most of one little breast had escaped from beneath a tight string of brassiere. Black silk, a sheer, mere ribbon of it, accentuated the rest of her—the darling! White flesh gleamed through the dark mesh.

"I don't know," she mumbled, pulling the robe about her.

I walked to her, put my fingers out and tilted her chin back. I studied her face. I'd had a brief glimpse of this Lew Morton they had in jail, and something whanged me hard.

"You and this Morton look a lot alike," I muttered. "Your name is Morgan, his Morton. Hmmmm. And would he be fool enough to leave a tag in those clothes he discarded? And leave a cover from the money in the room?

I caught her off guard again. "My brother wouldn't do that!" she hysterically defended. Then she realized the cat was loose, and broke into another fit of weeping. I sat down and dragged her down on my lap and hung onto her. The quivering, warm young thing in my arms made me forget the four grand. You can't call me mercenary!

"Listen, sweets," I whispered. "Tell Hard Guy about it. I get the full story, maybe I'll get your brother out of jail."

She flung her arms around my neck, again forgetful of the opening robe. She crossed her bare legs and I watched the dimple smooth out of one knee as it bent smoothly. It was sort of chill in here, but sweat broke out on me, and I felt all dizzy and annoyed.

"Trust me," I whispered in one little ear. "But not too much—now."

"You help my brother—" she began.

"We'll talk terms later."

"My brother," she said, snuggling against me and messing up my usual tendency to reason, "was in the penitentiary for three years. In the Middle West. I came here, not long ago, and got a job in the bank. When Lew got out, I sent him money. He came here and got work. The only thing he could get was a bartender's job. He wouldn't let folks know he was my brother because of that, and the fact he'd been locked up might ruin my bank job."

"That's easy to see," I agreed, breathing heavily. With her arms around my neck, one plump little breast was moulded warmly against my arm.

"Well, today, Lew came here, sick. Said he'd had a drink, and felt queer. He passed out. I left him here and went back to work, and right after, the holdup happened. It couldn't have been Lew! I came back here, soon as I could—not knowing he'd be blamed. He felt better, got up and left, and they got him!"

She buried herself against me again, kicking her feet and making me miserable with a fine display of underpinning.

"Hell," I grouched. "You don't dare alibi him. Because you hid the fact he was your brother—because he thought it best—because you worked in the bank and the side door was open for a getaway—why, they wouldn't believe you if you did shout out. They'd implicate you sure as hell!

"Somebody knew your set-up, and I know where to look!"

I slid her off my lap and onto her feet. She turned a hopeful, wet little face up to me when I stood up. I bent and kissed the tears away, and my ideas ran away with me. I kissed her ears, her throat, soft, eager little mouth. She clung to me, and her moist, warm lips pressed savagely to mine.

Leave it to me! When I left, she was

standing starry-eyed and gasping in the center of the room.

I SLOUGHED through the mud and went to the jail. Specs was hanging around. He ground his teeth and growled, "You louse. Did you get that lipstick on your mush at that green house?"

"Get me in to see Lew Morton, and maybe I'll tell," I mocked.

He sensed a story, had a yap with the fat jailer, and I got to go back to the stinkhole cell where Lew Morton was. He was a square enough looking kid. Likely learned his lesson, whatever he'd done before, and wanted to do it right.

"Lew, I just came from your sister," I began. "I know all about you. You see, I'm a private dick, sort of. I don't think you did this job. You were doped and framed. Boy, who else knew you were Grace's brother, and you had a record?"

He sat and stared at me, trying to make up his mind.

"You got an ugly puss, but you look straight," he decided. "There's a punk here that was in the Big Hacienda with me out West. He hangs around Fatty's joint, and knows a gambler by name of Duck Ildora. This bum's name is Gus Brint."

I sucked in my breath. It all hooked up so well. The men on the train with the money. Duck Ildora's dame, Donia Wade. She'd been to Piney to spot out for sure if the payroll came over to the bank. That was the reason for her interest on the train. And her signal to Duck Ildora at the depot.

"This John Fay, the teller," I pressed on. "Know anything about him?"

"Not much. But I do know he used to come to Fatty's by the back door and order a drink in the private room back there."

"Thanks, kid," I said, getting up. "I think I'll have you out of here."

"Not if you buck Duck Ildora, you won't," he mumbled. "But," in a harsh tone, "I'll tell you what: You expose my sister to any trouble, and I'll get you if I got to come back from the grave."

"I won't expose her—er, to any trouble," I agreed.

Specs was hanging to my coattail when I barged out and stood in the mud and rain, figuring what next. "You know something," he yapped.

"Listen," I snarled, "you lead me to this Fatty's place. Then step clear."

"What—"

"Wait and see," I barked.

He led me up to where the end of the main drag bumped up against a big log, barnlike joint, and in we went. There was a long, log-faced bar, tables and chairs with unbarked legs, a dance floor and booths. Through an open doorway, I saw another room where an as yet small crowd played craps and poker and faro.

I whispered to Specs, bribed him with some drinks, the heel! and he got the screw-faced barkeep to trot back and say that I was a news feature writer, had heard of Fat Stuff, and please could I yarn with him.

The screw-face came back and told me to go through a door beyond the dance orchestra platform. I left Specs nibling at his poison and promenaded back. Through that door, I came into a room that echoed when I spoke, and I guessed it had double soundproof walls. There were two poker tables and some chairs. And a heavy safe in one corner.

PLAYING a game of solitaire, in a special built chair, sat about four hundred pounds of jellied flesh. Piggy

eyes were lost in the folds of it as he looked up at me.

"Sit down," he wheezed. I shook my head, backed up and dropped a heavy bar across the door. He blinked stupidly.

"I want to know something about John Fay coming in this back room," I revealed. "Uh, that's an angle of a story I need. The bank robbing yarn, you know."

"Listen," Fat Stuff snarled. "I ain't got no hook up on that. Yeah, Fay did come here. Because he worked in the bank, he couldn't very well drink out front."

"Or gamble," I agreed. "You know damned well he gambled. And I bet he lost."

"You go to hell!" he spat, started to move ponderously from his chair.

I stepped over and kicked him hard in that terrific belly. A fist would have made no impression on it, and I was in a hurry. A hurry to wind this up and get back to Grace Morgan. Fat Stuff squeaked and puffed and I kicked him again. "He gambled and lost!" I barked. "Out with it."

"Well, maybe he did, damn you! But not to me, much."

"How much?" I raised my brogan again.

"Oh, about seven-eight thousand, I guess. But I tore the paper up. It wasn't worth the pencil marks on it."

"Yeah?" I was on him and all over him, pinching his fat, kneeing him, slapping his fat jowls. "I can be hard," I panted. "You better squawk."

The chair crashed. I landed with my knees in his belly. "I—I sold the paper," he sobbed. "To—oh!—Duck Ildora."

I got up. He lay there glaring at me, yet there was a lot of mean cunning in his eyes. I went to the door. "Fat Stuff, I was you, I'd keep a gag in my whimper box for a while." I went out and slammed the door.

"Listen, Specs," I urged, back at the bar. "I want you to stick here. If you see anything suspicious, come and let me know. I'll be wherever this Donia Wade hangs out. Where's that?"

"Behind here, in a cabin. The sure road to the morgue. I wish you'd tell me what this has to do with the robbery and kill—"

"You play ball," I advised and mooched out of there.

I went around Fatty's, cussing the intermittent rain, got my heat limbered in my coat pocket and looked to see that Fatty had lammed out here. Then I went and whacked on the door of the two room cabin which sat about twenty yards back of Fatty's. The door was opened, and Donia Wade stood blinking at me.

"I'm lonesome," I complained. "Let me in?"

She hesitated, looked around at a cheap alarm clock. "For a half hour only," she agreed. I whammed in, businesslike. "I'm a fast worker," I assured her cheerfully.

She wore a simple house apron that revealed a lot. I didn't waste around on stuff and such. I made a grab for her. She was all set to act coy and come-on, and you should have seen how hard her pus got when I got the front of her dress and shook her hard.

"Baby, I mean business. I want to know where this Duck Ildora and Gus Brint hid the bank loot."

"Let go me," she snarled. She scratched viciously at my face and I grabbed her hands. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know damned well what I'm talking about. John Fay got in a jam by gambling. Ildora bought his notes. That's why Fay didn't put the satchel

in the vault. The satchel of geetus you were casing on the Roughneck Special this morning. It was Fay who left the bank's side door open for the getaway."

"You're nuts!" she sneered.

"So was John Fay. That's why he looked surprised. They shot the poor sucker to keep him out of a cut, and to hush his face. Yeah, and it was your bunch, through Brint, that knew Lew Morton's set-up, about his sister, and framed it onto him!"

"I want to know what you know," I said. "I don't think the coppers have the right guy!"

BOY, gentlemen and roughnecks, her face showed I had the truth. She writhed in my grasp, while her breasts scraped hard across my chest, and her knees dug at me. She kicked my shins and jerked back. The front of her dress came away in my hands and I grabbed at her. Warm, yielding flesh met my clutches. She ran, I caught her, and all she was left with was a hotsy-oopsy figure and a wisp of lace on it.

She kicked again and I grabbed her up in my arms and held her over one knee. "Sister," I croaked, "I can be damned hard. You better" —bending her back until her heaving stomach bulged "—crack smart and right."

"Damn—damn you. You're a dick!" she groaned.

"I'm not. Just a wise guy on the chisel." I eased up on her.

"Ah, that's different," she mumbled.

She grabbed me around the waist with one arm, the neck with the other. Her lips found mine, her kiss had the kick of a live wire. I was too blind to realize she twisted her head so she could see that clock. That sizzling kiss was taking me on a deep, dizzy dive, and she wasn't still a second. . . . Hugging me, kissing me, pressing her soft, nearly unclad body against me. I forgot everything for a moment, and that moment was enough.

The door whammed open. "A'right, mug. Fat Stuff was tellin' us about you. Leggo that dame!"

I pushed Donia Wade away from me, and hated her for the way she laughed. Duck Ildora, a hell-faced, killing devil, came on in, the roscoe in his mitt looking like a Coast defense cannon. A hoppy-faced, tall guy, Gus Brint, followed him and closed the door.

In a burst of words and profanity, Donia spilled the yarn. "A wise guy, wanting to muscle in," she finished. Duck Ildora studied me, his eyes cunning.

"Lemme plug him, Duck. Then when we lam, they'll be no—" Gus Brint began.

"Plug him *here?* and hook us up with things? Fool!" Duck snarled. "Nope. It'll be easier to pay him off."

"Whew!" Was that a relief. I felt my spine untense and I could move my tongue again.

" 'Course, we ain't got the stuff here," Duck shrugged. "I need a drink. We'll have a drink, an' then I'll pay you off."

He lowered a lid at Donia. "Bring us some drinks. *Big* ones.' '

She went into the other room. And came back with three big hookers of whiskey. "Here's to success," Duck proposed. We drank.

They did. I coughed, grabbed my handkerchief and managed to get most of the booze on it. Unseen. I got some on my coat, swallowed a very little, held some in my kisser.

Boy! had they fixed me a mickey finn. Enough, I knew, to kill me. I could have died here, supposedly, as far as the dumb law was concerned, from rotten whiskey. They wouldn't be blamed or hunted for that. I grinned, lurched, passed a hand across my eyes. Then I buckled and fell heavily.

"We'll get the dough out of Fat Stuff's safe and kite out," Duck snarled. "This wise chiseler—hell! Come on. Get some duds on, Donia. Papa can't stop to enjoy the show."

"Fat Stuff—I hate for him to cut in because he sold us those I.O.U. tabs, and has stashed the dough," Brint griped.

"Fat Stuff blabs too easy. We'll stick a shive in him. Maybe they'll blame this ganey here. Think he got Fat Stuff an' done the dutch."

I lay there, hardly breathing. I was a little woozy, even with no more than I'd swallowed of that damned knockout shot. Donia came out of the other room. She said: "He's out like a light." They went out and closed the door.

I GOT up and peeked out the window. It was getting deep dusk, and the leaden sky and the rain hurried the darkness. I saw them go in the back door of Fatty's, and then I went out.

"Thick um up, dummit!"

I wheeled. Specs was standing at the corner of the house, a gun in his hands. Both hands. One of his eyes was closed, his lips were thick and puffy and he weaved.

"Specs. This is Hard Guy. Lay off the heat."

"You!" he mushed. "I oughta shoot you, 'stead of tryin' help you. Leave me at that bar, so Fat Stuff'd come out an'

beat hell out of me an' throw me out for introducin' you!"

"You egg. I'm laughing, but I'm sorry," I said. "I—Get back." I gave him a shove that spun him to the ground. My heat was ready, but I wasn't. I hated to try shooting it out like this.

Donia ran out the back door. A dim blur in the growing dark. She fanned for the piney woods nearby. Duck Ildora came out, with Brint on his heels. Brint raised his arm and hurled what looked like a long knife away from him.

"Hold it!" I yelled.

Duck saw me, skidded to a surprised halt, raised a gun. He had a black satchel in the other hand. I fired, got an answering streak of gunflame back in my direction. I fired again, Duck staggered, his head snapped forward and he came down in a heap.

Gus Brint was shooting now. A bullet clipped my coatsleeve. Donia stopped, ran back for the satchel. Specs—I doubt he knew it was a dame he shot at, he was that woozy—yanked a trigger on her. She put a hand to a tender spot, screamed and fanned out of there. A bullet-burned seat makes you feel like that. They never saw Miss Donia Wade again. She may still be running.

I slipped and went to one knee and a bullet moaned over my head. I pulled trigger three times as Gus Brint, firing, moved away. The last shot. A sound like a cracking melon. My slug had gotten Brint between the eyes.

I ran forward and got the satchel. Specs was doing a step in waltz time, yammering about what a story this would make. I met the rush of men who boiled around here. Dill Pickle and Ike Dort, as usual, were among the last.

We looked in on Fat Stuff then. The shive had to cut a lot of blubber to reach a vital spot. Fat Stuff wasn't quite dead. That was good. His last testament saved me a lot of explaining. And I could play the part of a brainy guy, instead of a hard, empty-headed cluck who'd had a world of luck and almost got dead. Fat Stuff told how they planted poor Lew Morton. But croaked before he might have told about the sister part. Kind of him.

Someone had gotten old man Garrett, of the bank. He ran up to me, and I gave him the dough in the presence of Dill Pickle and Ike Dort. Those two looked at me in a hangdog, accusing way.

"I'll be down for my dough in the morning," I told Garret. I almost had to fight him off to keep him from kissing me. His weren't the kisses that I craved.

I shook Specs off when he wanted to know where I was going.

"You lug," he yammered. "I know. I know. And all the effort I wasted there. I'm going out and get boiled, soon as I get my story in."

I dropped by the gow. Lew Morton already had the news and was hopping up and down. He wrung my hands through the bars, and said he didn't give a damn if the judge *had* gone to Piney, and he couldn't get a release until morning.

"You'll see Sis," he said.

"Sure. Damn right I will."

AND I did. I scraped my shoes carefully and knocked on the door. It was flung open and Grace leaped off the floor and into my arms, wriggling like a puppy. But what a sweet puppy.

"I heard. I heard about it. I'm so pleased. But, oh! you might have been killed."

"Not with you waiting around," I grinned. I sat down and held her on my

(Continued on page 123)

GAUNT shadows crossed the Las Vegas Range, made stippled black-and-white bars against the side of the rather small ranch-house masked in by the cottonwoods.

Jim Draper threw the top rail of the horse-corral gate into place and strode toward the house. His eyes were tired, yet they did not lose the flintiness, the wariness, that weeks of vigilance had stamped into them.

He stared at the foothills of Chocha-ca Peak, empurpled by distance. The line of his jaw tensed. Knots of muscle leaped out at the corners.

Sally Draper opened the kitchen door. A square of golden lamp-light outlined her slim young figure. "Ready, dear?"

"Okeh, Sally, gal." Jim's voice was steady, but his hands went across the bullet gouges on the gallery railing—

"Sky them paws!" Draper snapped. The moaning girl stumbled back as she was released.

Ranch Wife

By TOM B. STONE

Draper couldn't savvy why anybody'd want to drygulch him. Could this lovely young bride—the girl he'd just brought home to the ranch — be the reason? Which one of his friends was not a friend?

marks that had not been there the night before. But then, neither had Sally.

Jim Draper had driven Sally, his new bride, by buckboard from Tascosa across Chochaca that afternoon. He had not mentioned anything to Sally about the trouble. No need for her to worry unduly.

Now, from the darkness of the porch, he drank in her beauty hungrily. He was mad about her. His gaze lowered from the aureole of golden hair touched by the lamplight to the softly plump contours of her bosom, swept down to shapely hips. A fragrant evening breeze rustled the cottonwoods, sculptured the cotton dress about the rounded thighs. The blood beat against his temples as he took in all of her, even down to the small, dainty feet. Sally wore leather *huaraches,* the straps ribboned lightly about her trim ankles. The young rancher gathered her into his arms, pressed her body against him. Her fragrant breath was warm against his cheek.

"Darling!" he murmured.

Every rounded contour of her form was for him, now, every pliant curve, every secret. His eyes dropped to her breasts, tenderly moulded hillocks of white beauty, swelling beneath their thin covering with every quickening breath.

Sally turned her flower-like face up to his. Her rose-petal lips parted slowly, invitingly. Her eyelids drooped with

a tremulous flutter of sooty lashes, and she yielded the undulant warmth of her body to his eager, forceful arms. Her mouth was a brand of moist fire upon his own. Jim kissed her lightly, then almost cruelly, and in a moment had whisked her up and was carrying her into the house.

He set Sally on her feet in the room that she had decorated so gaily with brightly-colored chintz curtains. Her lips opened, whispered, and in an instant she was on his lap in the rough chair, her arms trembling but strong about his neck, her cheek soft and velvety for a moment against his chin. So his arm tightened about her waist, she nestled up to him with her humid mouth warm against his thoat. Fascinated, breathing hoarsely, he watched her crossed knees, bare as the rumpled cotton skirt slid further back each second until the sleek whiteness of her thigh was crossed by brief underthings. Jim clutched her feverishly, feeling the wild pounding of her heart as he kissed her lips, her throat, her bare shoulder. . . . The touch of that quivering body was exquisite torture. "Mine!" he said huskily. "You're mine, at last—!"

His young bride's lips pressed hard against his own. "Yours, dear! Always!" she whispered.

THE clock in the ranch living-room struck the hour, then the half hour, but Jim Draper had not heard it. His whole world, on this night. was in this chintz-draped room, his bride in his arms, her love responding to his own.

Yet the creak of a board close by caused his body to tense. Was it mere imagination? These had been troubled times on his little ranch. And in his eagerness had he forgotten to bolt the outside door? His gunbelt hung from a wall peg. He took a step toward it just as the door from the hallway swung open.

"Get 'em up—you two!" a harsh voice grated. "Up high! An' don't try no funny business!"

The glaring whiteness of a bull's-eye lantern shot across Jim Draper's thwarted face, brought into cruel prominence the nearly nude figure of Sally as she half crouched, trembling, knees bent and bared shoulders huddled forward over her breasts, trying to cover herself with the cotton dress she had snatched up.

The voice jeered, as she held the thin garment across the beauty of her swelling breasts: "Aw, don't try to hide, lady! We reckon as how you're pretty damned nice!"

Jim Draper thought back to the bullet gouges on the porch, thought of the sniper who had shot at him from cover a few days before. Whatever his mysterious enemies had against him, this appeared to be the showdown.

He could not see the face of the man behind the lantern or his companion. But he could catch the gleam of the six-guns in the hands of both of them. He felt helpless. Alone, he would have chanced a leap toward his gun-belt hanging on the wall. But with Sally, Sally at the mercy of brutes like these—!

Yet if he surrendered, if he allowed himself to be trussed up, what then? The interlopers were leering at Sally—

With a movement as fast as a lizard's tongue, his hand shot down, grabbed up one of his spurs from the floor, and with a single, follow-through motion, flung it straight at the lantern. The glass shattered, the wick went black with a stench of scorched oil.

Two guns flamed. A brace of slugs whistled over Jim's head, snicked into

the wall back of him. Then he had hit the nearer man in a flying tackle, cracked his hard fist against the other's jaw, smacked him to the floor.

The second man proved none too game. He had scuttled out of the room, was running down the hallway. Jim Draper reached for his gunbelt, raced out after the fugitive. But the latter had got to his horse, and all Jim got at him was an unsatisfactory shot in a bad light as the fellow galloped down the driveway. There was a flash from the gun of the man on the horse, and Jim sank to his knees. The lucky shot had creased him lightly across the right temple. He was not unconscious, yet he felt dizzy and his muscles were momentarily paralyzed.

He heard his wife scream, back in the house, managed to get to his feet, stagger in through the kitchen, along the hallway, and into the room where Sally had sunk to her knees near the smashed window, her slender back bare, shoulders shaking as she still clutched the twisted cotton dress to her breast.

Outside Jim heard dying hoofbeats. A wave of nausea swept over him; a blinding pain shot across his eyes, but he turned toward the door.

"I'm gettin' my hoss," he grated, "an'—"

"Don't leave me here alone, Jim!" Sally cried frantically. "It might be a trick on their part—to get you away. There might be others!"

Jim nodded, knelt beside her. Catching his assailants and getting at the reason for it all—his whole being craved decisive action. But he couldn't leave the girl he loved alone, helpless and unprotected.

"Jim! Jim! You're not—not hurt?"

Sally had thrown her arms about him. There was a sob in her voice.

"It's nothing serious," Jim assured her. "Just enough to keep me from catching those rattlers, that's all. I'm glad that second hombre was a yellow c'yote. If he'd had more sand, he could have done some damage." Tenderly he lifted Sally from the floor, kissed her and stroked her bare shoulders soothingly.

"But Jim! Why did they come here? What could they want from us?"

Draper scowled thoughtfully. "I don't know, honey. This ain't the first time they've been after me. But the other time, some one only sniped at me from the ridge. They never got as open about it as this before—"

HE cut off abruptly as hoofs sounded on the driveway. Gun in hand, he ran from the room, and out through the kitchen. But the voice of the horseman in the driveway reassured him—the voice of Dave Carlin, who owned the Cross C Ranch, a half-mile up the Chochaca Trail.

"That you, Jim?" Dave called. "I heard shots. Seemed to come from here."

Jim Draper walked out to explain to his friend. Dave shook with indignation. "Any ideas at all, Jim?" he asked.

Draper shook his head. "Not a single one."

Dave looked at him sharply. "Didn't you tell me a few weeks ago that Sims Trent wanted to buy this spread?"

"That's right," Jim answered. His brows puckered. "The ol' skinflint did want it pretty bad."

Dave Carlin was silent for a moment. "Well, anyhow," he said finally. "I'm sure glad things ain't worse than they turned out to be."

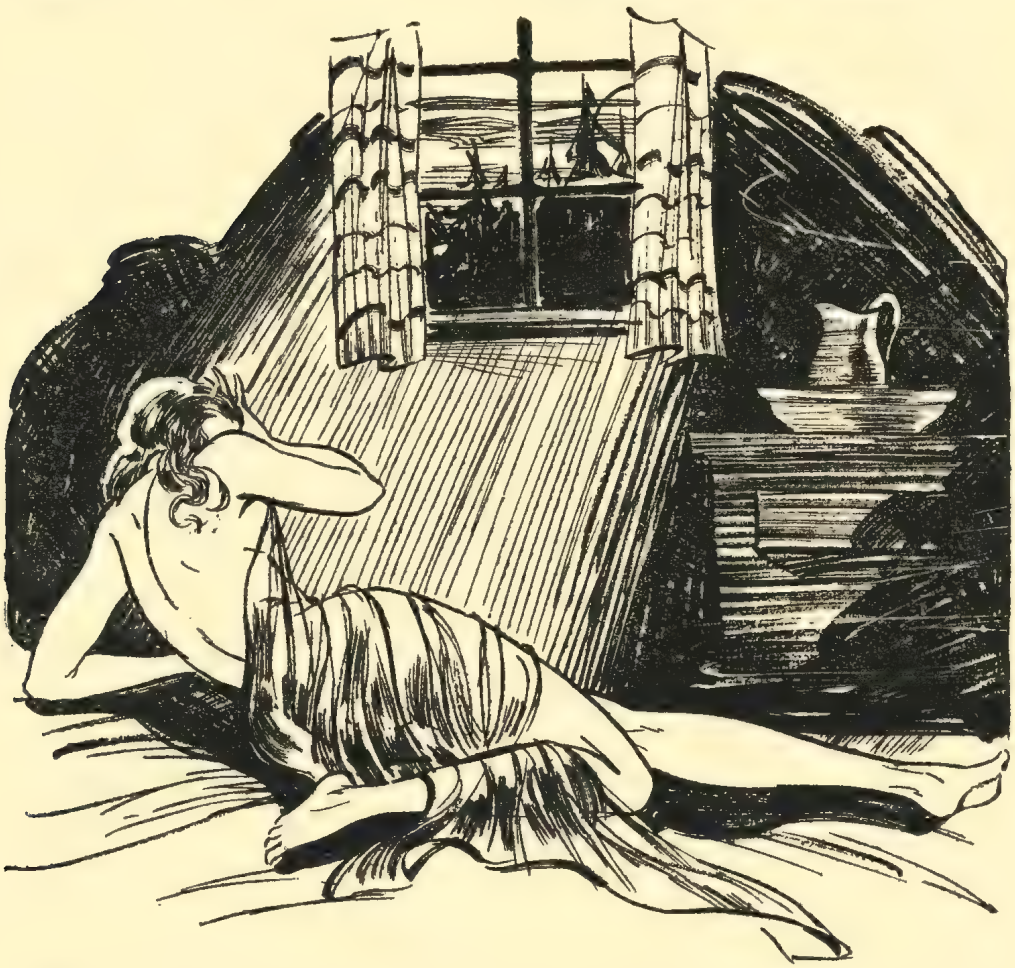
He climbed back into the saddle. "Well, reckoned there was some excite-

ment. If I can ever help you in anything, Jim, you know you can call on me. I'll be steppin' along now."

He reached down and shook hands with Draper. "Congratulations, pard. Some evenin' at an earlier hour, I'd be right glad to meet the new Missus. *Adios,* Jim."

The clock struck the hour, the half-hour, another hour. The countryside was quiet. . . .

SUN shafts made dancing pattern on the corral fence as Jim Draper climbed to the buckboard. He leaned down and kissed Sally tenderly.



Draper did not detain him. He watched him canter down the driveway, then went back into the ranch-house.

The bedroom was dark. Sally was wide awake, still trembling and shaken; and it was some time before his gentle caresses had completely quieted her fears.

"I ought to get into town an' have a talk with Ol' Trent, anyhow," Jim said. "I'll get the thing off my mind. Chances are I'll figure from what he has to say whether he was behind the business last night or not. Keep the doors bolted against strangers, dear."

Sally nodded. "Don't worry, honey. I

A brace of slugs whistled past him before he had hit the nearest man on the jaw.

have the loaded Winchester, too. I'll be all right." Then she waved to her stalwart young husband as the buckboard rattled down the driveway. Jim waved back. His eyes were upon her until she turned and disappeared into the ranchhouse.

He sent the matched pair of sorrels stepping along smartly. It was a long trip into town, and he wanted to get back as soon as possible.

The thought of Sally even crowded out the thoughts of the desperadoes' mysterious visit of the night before. Jim thought of her eagerness, her full breasts heaving stormily with emotion, her red mouth and soft arms. . . .

"Giddap! Get along there!" he yelled at the team.

IN the bustling little town of Tascosa he met several friends, but resisted all offers to take a drink. When he ran into his friend, Dave Carlin, however, he suggested a snort of redeye, and the two young ranchers strode into the Cactus Blossom Saloon.

Dave Carlin listened attentively as Jim told of his plan to have a showdown with Sims Trent.

"Might's well get the thing over with, I reckon," Carlin agreed. "But don't get hot-headed, Jim. Trent's a power in this neck o' the woods. If I ain't hornin' in, I'll just mosey down to his store with you."

They found Sims Trent sitting behind his dusty old roll-top desk at the rear of the Tascosa General Store. Trent nodded as they came in. "Howdy, boys," he greeted. "Congratulations, Draper. Lookin' right peart after your weddin'. How's the missus?"

Jim Draper stepped close to Trent, his chin squared. "I'll take care o' the missus, Trent," he said crisply. "Now, Trent, I want a showdown with you. You've been damned persistent in tryin' to buy my spread. Why, I just don't know. The grazin' ain't none too good, an' it ain't well watered. Don't see why an hombre should try forcin' me off it by hirin' gunmen to shoot up the place!"

Sims Trent narrowed his eyes. "What does all that mean, Draper?"

Tersely, Jim Draper related the incident of the previous night. "Maybe I'm tellin' you somethin' you don't know, Trent," he said, "and maybe I ain't. But I'm tellin' you this, too: My spread ain't for sale. And there's a couple o' loaded shotguns waitin' out there for the next hombre that steps on that land without my permission. *Sabe?*"

"Now what the hell—!" Trent protested. "What reason you got—?"

But Jim Trent had turned on his boot-heel and was striding away. Dave Carlin followed him.

"Reckon it's bad judgment, goin' off the handle like that, unless you got right strong suspicions," he said quietly to Jim. "Better cool down, pard. Let's step into the Cactus Blossom again. We'll drink to the new bride, pard."

They had several drinks. There was a glowing heat in Jim Draper's stomach as he rode out of Tascosa. He jogged along steadily. He wanted to be home before dark.

Crossing the shallow Chochaca River, he thought he heard hoofbeats to the west, and listened. Somehow—he did not quite know why—he thought of Sally. He stopped the team. The hombres on those horses were pounding along hard. Strange thoughts passed through Jim Draper's head. But then he laughed to himself, to quiet his fears. Probably just a few waddies hightailing it toward town, to spend their money in a hurry at the Cactus Blossom Saloon. As he listened, the hoofbeats ceased where the canyon to the west broke into a narrow-edged defile. Why were the men stopping there, if they were waddies taking a short cut to town?

But again Jim Draper laughed his fears away. He clucked to his team of matched roans. Turning up toward the canyon would mean a considerable delay, and he wanted to hasten home to Sally.

But when he forced the team up the final sandy stretch that led to his little spread, there was fear in his heart again. The windows in the ranch-house were dark. He took the whip to the team of matched roans, galloped them up the slope and into the driveway at a speed that threatened to upset the buckboard.

He leaped from the buckboard, raced toward the house. His eyes distended as he saw that the door had been broken

down. He ran into the house, saw the deserted living-room, the deserted kitchen and bedroom. The furniture had been knocked over, as though there had been a struggle. Jim Draper cursed himself for a fool.

He raced outside and down to the corral. It was the work of a minute to bridle his fast pinto. Then, not bothering with a saddle, Jim Draper was on its back and spurring the speedy pinto down the driveway. The fast riding of those horsemen he had heard near Chochaca Creek seemed to have a real meaning now.

"One thing!" Jim Draper muttered as he forced the pinto along at breakneck speed. "If Sally's harmed in any way, I'll ride straight into Tascosa an' tear the skin off ol' Trent in inch strips!"

He rode madly on.

THE hide of the pinto was roughened and darkened with sweat as Jim Draper hauled to a stop near the shallow Chochaca River, ground-hitched his horse and walked gingerly toward the west. Pitchy blackness layered about him. He saw nothing, heard nothing—until he was within perhaps three hundred yards of Chochaca Canyon. Then a piercing scream—a woman's scream—rent the still night air.

Jim Draper's hands whipped to his holsters. He yanked out his twin .45s, long-legged it up toward the bend in the canyon. He streaked around the turn. His heart was beating wildly.

His face was a mask of fury as he rounded the full turn. Just ahead of him, before a camp-fire, two big gunmen, one of them bearded, were ripping the clothes from a woman. Sally!

Sally screamed, fighting with little fists and kicking feet, but the bearded gunny struck her across the face and caught her as she toppled. "Well, seein' as there's only one gal," he chuckled, "an' there's two of us hombres, we might play a hand o' seven-up—"

"Sky them paws!" Jim Draper cut in. His eyes blazed. His two .45s were ready to roar.

The two gunmen swung about amazingly fast for the size of them. The big bearded hombre let go of Sally, and she fell backward, her white legs still flailing as they scraped along the ground. Her heaving bare breasts reflected the firelight with their glossy curves.

The gunmens' hands lashed for their holsters. Jim Draper fired twice. He shot to kill. The gunmen pitched on their faces.

Draper stepped over their bodies, gathered Sally in his arms, pressed her half nude, sob-shaken figure to him. "Sally!" he breathed. "It's all right now, honey. This is Jim. Open your eyes—"

HE whirled at the scuff of a boot behind him. He swore vividly. No use to draw his gun this time. It would mean Sally's life as well as his own. A man in a mask and a long, black cape held a brace of .45s that were aimed straight at him.

"Drop her!" came a hoarse command. "Then shove up them paws! I got top hand here! An' if you make a single movement toward them hog-legs, I'll fire—an' I'll fire at *her* first! Now, use your judgment!"

Jim released Sally and elevated his hands. The masked man circled back of him, plucked the .45s from his holsters.

"I said I'd fire at the gal," he chuckled, "but I ain't cheatin' myself like that. So I'll just—"

Bang!

A leaden slug ripped into Jim Draper's right shoulder. Even as the bullet spun him about with the pile driver im-

(Continued on page 122)

Range Law

(Continued from page 35)

into patches of chokeberry and mountain mahogany. Jim soon discovered the girl's errand now. From the way she cut in and out of the brush tangles, he knew she was looking for a mountain deer.

He would have turned back, satisfied, but the canyon suddenly echoed with the thin, spiteful crack of her carbine. On the edge of the explosion, the canyon was filled with a mighty roar. Jim's pony wanted to bolt. To man and animal that sound was sign of a silver-tipped bear. The carbine was cracking again and again. The bear was roaring continuously, angered by the sting of bullets that couldn't kill him.

JIM snaked his Winchester free, leaped out of leather, jumped to the bench below from where the sound was coming now. What he saw when he scrambled up made his scalp rise. Running perilously close to the edge of the overhanging bench, was Kate Tramper, her overhalls almost torn from her body by the brush, and behind her, gaining at every leap, the loping black mass of the silver-tip. Kate was trying frantically to jam loads into her carbine—and fumbling every time.

The enraged animal was flexing for the leap that would bring his front paws down on the girl's body, when Jim's Winchester filled the canyon with its deafening explosion. Again and again the Winchester barked; then the roaring was silenced. When his smoke cleared, Jim saw the beast, a still bulk. Kate was standing a few feet off, staring, fascinated. Just as Jim reached her, she swayed and toppled to the ground in a dead faint.

WHEN she came to, she was lying on her couch in the cabin. Jim Logan was standing over her. Her first words were, "Don't—don't let that bear get me!" Then she brushed back her hair and sat up, forgetful of the rips in the upper part of her overall outfit, rips that her breasts peeped through.

"Jim Logan—you damn' law man! What are you doing here? Wait till I get my carbine, you—"

She realized suddenly and lay back with a groan.

"It *would* be you who saved me! A lawman!" She sprang up in sudden fury and ran for her carbine, forgetting that it wasn't loaded. "Get out of here," she screamed. "You've been watching for Pete! Spying on me!"

He took her in his arms to wrest the carbine away. He wanted to try talking to her again. From the door a gruff voice sounded.

"Put your hands up, damn' pronto. High."

Jim wheeled, realizing as he turned that his Winchester was across the room, and his holster guns on a table.

The girl cried "Pete!"

"Yes, Pete," the newcomer said surily. "An' what do I find when I come home? I find you makin' up to a lawman who's out to swing me. I find you snuggin' in his sneakin' arms, an' him so at home like he takes off his guns to be comfortable!"

The girl gasped. She started toward her step brother, anger in her eyes. He shouted her back. "Don't you come near me, you little skunk. Lovin' to a lawman.

Jim's Winchester filled the air with its deafening explosion.

A keepin' him in your cabin like a red-skirt in a dance hall!"

Jim said quietly, "You've got the drop on me now, Pete, but you'll eat those words before we shut off your voice for good."

Pete, snarling, hissed at him, "You won't get no chance, Mister Lawman. The slut there wants you about. I'm fixin' to let her keep you. But you won't do her no good, bein' dead like you'll be."

Jim glanced out of the corners of his eye to the table. He could gather up his holster guns in one sidewise leap. But the cabin would be filled with gunsmoke by the time he'd brought them up. Kate! Bullets would be flying around her. While he was considering his move, Pete Tramper spoke over his shoulder. "Come in, jaspers. Maybe you'll want to drop him a slug same as me."

Two dark-faced and mangy blacklegs showed in the door. Jim recognized them instantly, border renegades he'd been hunting. He knew their names, Shifty Gorgan and Dirk Kolker. Both with prices on their heads. Pete had known where to find them.

Jim Logan decided it was safer to get one of Pete's guns than try for his own. He tensed for a spring. Just as he

leaped, he shouted, "Down Kate."

HIS move took the killer by surprise. His gun belched an instant too late. Jim's fist was sweeping it away in a flat arc, his fingers clutching it out of Pete's hand. When he brought the weapon back from its arc, he rapped it across Pete's temples, sending him to the floor in a sprawling crash.

Kate still stood on her feet. Before he could send a slug at Shifty and Dirk, who were drawing, he saw her standing against the wall, the back of her hand at her mouth. He yelled to her again, "Down flat, for God's sake!" Then the small room of the cabin was filled with an ear splitting roar as three guns barked simultaneously.

Jim knew he had been too occupied with Kate to make his shot count. But neither Shifty nor Dirk had found him. Their guns burst into flame again, and Jim saw that Pete was stirring and reaching for his second iron. Pete, in his position on the floor, beneath the layers of gunsmoke, was in the best position to do danger. The other two were firing at random in the cloud of smoke, hunting out movements of bodies. They were wise enough not to silhouette themselves in the door's oblong of light.

In answer to one of Jim's slugs, sent shakily because he was trying to watch Pete and trying at the same time to get back to where he could fling Kate to the floor, a body fell with a thump. Almost immediately there was another crash. Shifty and Dirk were down!

Just then the girl screamed—"Don't, Pete! He saved my life!"

She had knelt to find him and had seen his gun coming up, pointing straight through the smoke at Jim. The killer flung a curse at the girl and his gun belched straight for Jim, while Jim was kneeling to seek him out.

Then there was a new explosion. It came from behind, where Jim, his shoulder racked, was dropping to a knee, collapsing. There was a grunt and a curse from Pete Tramper and he dropped his gun and clutched at his wrist. Kate, his step-sister, had caught up one of Jim's tabled guns, defying the rain of lead while she leaped across the room, and had sent a slug straight and sure at her brother's firing hand.

Jim, light fading, senses dulling, clung to his gun while he was sinking to the floor. He didn't know what had happened, why Pete didn't fire, now that both were on the level of the floor under the smoke. He knew only that he must get Pete out of the way before he lost consciousness. No telling what a Pete who would use his gun might do to Kate.

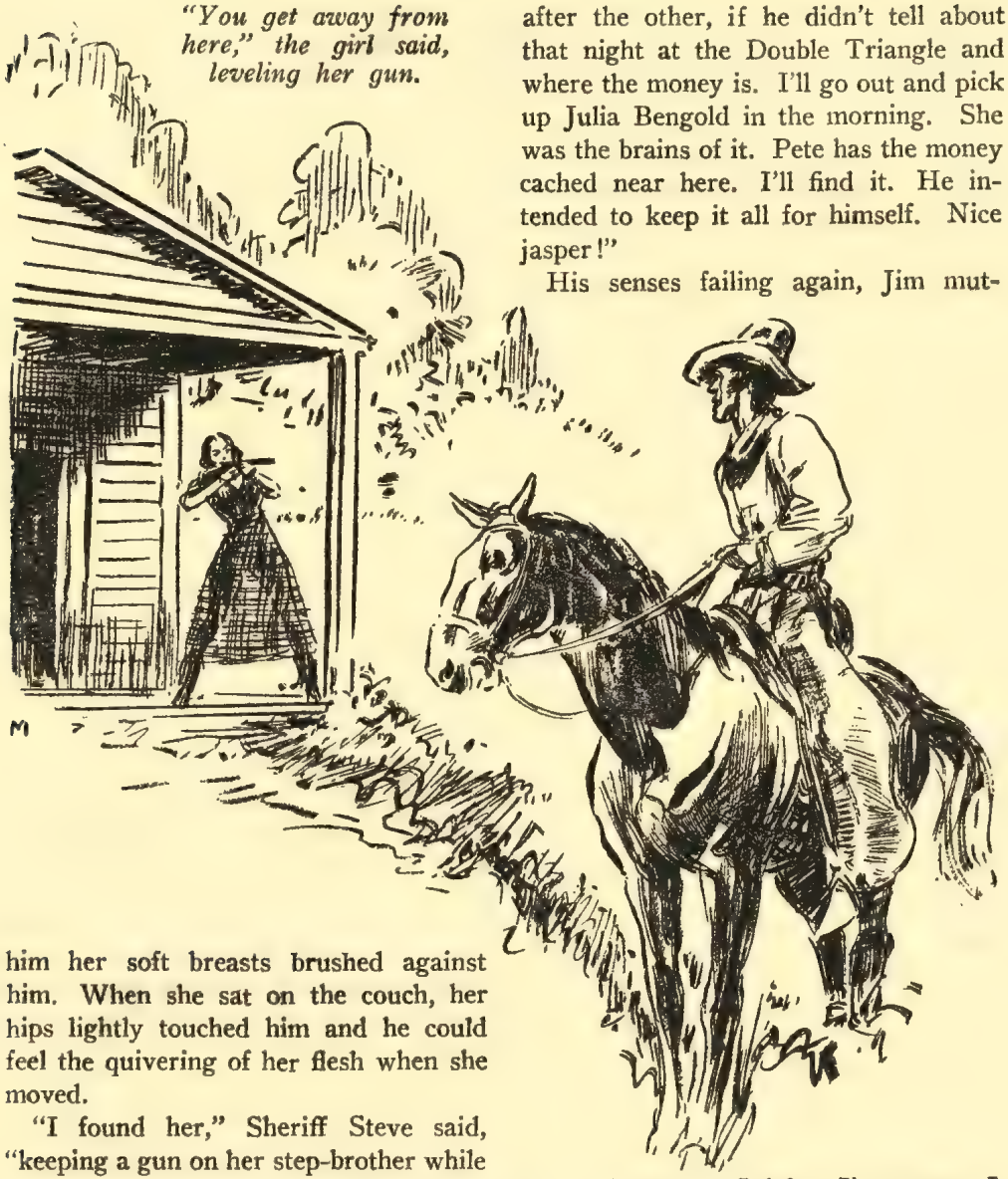
He took the steadiest aim he could and fired two shots. He heard their reverberations faintly. Then everything went black.

WHEN he came to, he was stretched on Kate's couch. It was far into the night and an oil lamp was burning. His shoulder was bandaged and there was something fragrant close to his face. He studied about it for a time, then opened his eyes. He saw that it was Kate Tramper's hair that had touched his face while her head lay on his chest listening to his heart.

Standing over the couch was the tall, angular shape of Sheriff Steve Garvin.

"Some men heard the shooting and rode into town to tell me," he explained. "I got out of bed and came here. I knew where that shooting would be. I got here too late."

Jim tried to sit up but Kate's hand held him down. She'd changed to her gingham dress, and when she bent over



"You get away from here," the girl said, leveling her gun.

him her soft breasts brushed against him. When she sat on the couch, her hips lightly touched him and he could feel the quivering of her flesh when she moved.

"I found her," Sheriff Steve said, "keeping a gun on her step-brother while she tended to you, keeping your bandages wet. And she was tellin' him that if he moved, hurt like he was, both arms shot, that she'd kill him deader'n a horseshoe."

"Both arms!" Jim muttered.

Kate bent over him again. "When you were going down. You wouldn't kill him—because of me. You got his arms."

"What's more," Sheriff Steve said, "she threatened to dig his eyes out, one after the other, if he didn't tell about that night at the Double Triangle and where the money is. I'll go out and pick up Julia Bengold in the morning. She was the brains of it. Pete has the money cached near here. I'll find it. He intended to keep it all for himself. Nice jasper!"

His senses failing again, Jim muttered, "Tell the Spitfire I'm sorry—I had to shoot him—at all."

Kate's low laugh, first time he'd ever heard her laugh, brought him back to consciousness swiftly. She leaned close, so he could see the rise of the twin treasures within the bosom of her gingham dress.

"It doesn't matter about his arms," she said. "It's only yours that will count with me."

Flame of the Border

(Continued from page 61)

dipped a pen in an ink-bottle and handed it to Dan. "If your signature should not be honored," he said, "you die by torture. Now, write. You will date it yesterday, August eighteenth."

Dan Wayne wrote the date as ordered. "Spell Miguel Quesada for me," he said. "I don't want this check refused. I've decided I want to live."

"You are wise."

Gomez spelled out the name. Wayne wrote it as spelled. He filled in the numerals. "A big price to pay for freedom," he groaned.

Gomez said nothing. He watched carefully as Dan wrote in the amount on the line below. His eyes gleamed as Dan filled in the final line with his signature.

Then Dan's arms were relashed behind his back, and for what seemed like five minutes Gomez studied the signature and compared it with the signatures on the tabs. He held a discussion with Pablo, and finally Pablo got up and walked out of the cabin. A moment later the sound of hoofs on rock rattled through the stillness.

Gomez unholstered his gun again. He pointed it at Dan. "You have served your purpose, gringo," he said.

But after several seconds he lowered the gun. "No, I will not kill you yet. If the cash is not brought by Pablo, if there has been any trickery on your part, you do not get shot. You die—slowly. But I will send you to a quick death if the cash is brought."

"Damned nice of you," Dan said.

Gomez toppled him from the chair to the floor, and re-gagged him. He went to the doorway, seemed to be looking for some one—the men, doubtless his gunnies, that Dan had heard him refer to during the night. Dan was hopeful. Every minute counted. But his heart sank as the little bandit turned back into the living-room, bolted the door, and crossed to stand gloatingly over the trussed-up Fay Kersey.

"You and I we weel eet," he said in his atrocious English. "I untie the arms. Ah yes, and the legs."

He chuckled as he knelt beside the helpless girl. His back was to Dan, who heard the girl groaning as the bandit's murder-stained hands touched her caressingly.

Suddenly Gomez cursed and leaped up at the click of steel hooves on rock, but then he laughed again. "These are my men, *chiquita,*" he said as he peered out the single dusty window. "We can wait—a leetle while, yes?"

He ran to the door, unbolted it, and went out, banging it shut after him. Dan's pulses were pounding. His plan had worked—partly. He had not pleaded for that smelly, watery *olla podrida* stew for nothing. He wriggled around like a cripple snake until his wrists, tied behind his back, were immersed in the greasy mess. He knew the properties of everything that went into the making of lariats. Spotcord could be waterproofed, and was the best. Maguey stiffened and became kinky when damp. But rawhide, when wet, *always stretched!* A final, desperate chance, an outside chance!

He heard Gomez talking outside with his men. There seemed to be four or

The door crashed open. Dan catapulted into the little room, threw himself at Gomez.

five of them. There was ribald laughter. He heard Gomez's instructions for the men to hide themselves and their horses in the nearby cave and give warning of the approach of any one besides Pablo, who could be identified by his *grulla* cayuse.

Dan wriggled back to his original position. He lay there on his back with pumping heart as Gomez re-entered the cabin, and bolted the door. He kept his eyes closed, feigned sleep. His heart thumped harder than ever as he heard Gomez stride over to the girl and say: "Now, *chiquita,* I carry you een the other room—where eet ees more comfort, yes? We get acquaint, my preety one. *Si!*"

DAN still feigned sleep as he heard Gomez carry the girl, moaning and whimpering behind her gag, into the

other room of the cabin. Through the doorway, Dan could see the girl struggling in Gomez's arms, writhing futilely with bound arms and legs; then his view was blocked as the door slammed.

The cowboy went to work on his bonds in earnest. Sweat rolled down his gaunt face. The increasing groans of the girl gave him new strength. His heart pounded when, after perhaps three minutes of almost superhuman effort, he stretched the wet rawhide and found his hands free. And once his hands were free, the leg bonds took less than a minute to unfasten.

Then Dan was on his feet. He staggered a little. His muscles felt cramped. But he made three long leaps across the living-room and hit the closed door with every ounce of his hundred and eighty pounds. The door crashed open. Dan catapulted into the little room.

Gomez, who had untied the girl and torn off the serape from her nearly nude form, leaped up, and his hand went to his holster. But before he could draw his gun, Wayne's big, muscular hands were around his throat. With a wild pleasure, the cowboy put on all the pressure of his big fingers. Gomez wriggled for a few seconds, then shriveled to the floor, absolutely helpless. To make certain, Dan cracked the bandit over the skull with his own automatic. And he did not spare his strength.

He turned to the girl, who had wrapped herself in the one worn blanket of the cot. "We're not through this yet, Fay," he said. "But—"

He cut off abruptly as he heard the fast *clickety-clickety* of steel-shod hoofs on rock. The sounds grew louder. Dan ran into the larger room of the cabin, peered from the little window. His eyes were shining with excitement. Pablo had made the three miles to town and back in almost record time.

Dan slipped back into the room where the girl still cowered, terrified clutching the worn blanket. He unhooked Gomez's cartridge-belt, put it on, and cracked the bandit over the skull with his pistol again. He didn't want Gomez to regain consciousness at the wrong time. There would be plenty odds against him as it was.

A moment later, from the window of the larger room, he saw Pablo slip from his horse and gesture exultantly to one of the outside guards, explaining that he had the money. Pablo started to walk across to the entrance of the shack. Dan could have shot him dead then. Somehow he couldn't do it in cold blood.

He heard Pablo's loud knock on the barred cabin door, and his exultant shout in Spanish: "I have the cash, chief. Open up."

Dan remained silent. Pablo yelled through the door again, then Dan heard his excited voice. "Something wrong inside, men. The Americano may have overpowdered the chief. Break down the door!"

There was the sound of running feet, a terrific banging against the door. The door trembled, splintered in places, then the bolt-socket broke from the wood. The door flew open. Five Mexicans, including Pablo, started to rush into the cabin. And Dan went to work.

His first bullet spilled Pablo across the threshold. His second got a thin Mexican who had brought up his six-gun to fire. Bullets whistled and spatted about Dan, who was in the skimpy shelter of the cabin's cook-stove. He felt a hot burn across the left shoulder. He went to his knees, but he kept blazing away. He had to make every bullet count.

The three Mexicans left turned tail

and ran from the cabin, but one of them whirled quickly and emptied his six-gun through the doorway. Dan could feel blood running down his arm; he thought he heard the sound of horses' hoofs and the yells of men. Then he pitched to the floor and consciousness left him.

WHEN he came to, he found himself in the cot in the smaller room of the cabin, and Fay, wrapped in a blanket belted around her slender waist with rope, was bathing his face with water from a tin basin.

"Did they come?" Dan asked. "Did Tom Courtney—?"

"He's outside, Dan, standing guard with the two others while the deputy rode to town for the doctor. They lifted you in here and then thought they'd better search that cave and see if there's any more of 'em."

Fay pressed her hand to the cowboy's throbbing head. "I'm still puzzled as to why they came just at the right minute. They didn't have time to explain—"

"I'll explain," Dan told her with a grin. "I had an ace-in-the-hole. I took a chance—the only one we had. It came to me when I saw we'd got rid o' the woman. She couldn't have been fooled. But I knew Gomez an' Pablo were ignorant *mestizos,* probably couldn't read an' write much Spanish, to say nothin' of English."

He put his arm about the girl's waist. "Gomez 'ud know the 25,000 in figures. That 'ud be the same in any language. I put that down O.K. I put down the name o' Miguel Quesada the way he spelled it. I dated the check right. I signed my right signature, I had to. He had the tab signatures to compare, and anyhow, if I phonied the signature and Courtney wouldn't cash the check, we'd been plenty out o' luck.

"But there was one little irregularity. I figured Gomez might know what the written line 'Twenty-five thousand' might look like in English. But I took a chance. I wrote 'Twenty-five thoufollowhim.' When Gomez an' Pablo didn't get wise, I knew we had an outside chance. Old Tom Courtney's shrewd, even if he is a fool over women. He was shrewd enough to guess that if he didn't cash the check, I'd be killed. So he did what I reckoned he'd do. He cashed it, then got a few hombres together an' trailed Pablo back here."

Dan's arm tightened about the girl's yielding waist. "I been lovin' you for a long time, Fay. I want to marry you, buy a spread, an' settle down. How about it?"

Fay bent down and kissed the big cowboy full on the mouth.

"What do *you* think?" she said.

The Coyote Kid

(Continued from page 47)

Nate Melhorn. His face was black and his gun raised. The Kid shouted, "Wait, Melhorn!"

His gun arm was lifted high, holding his weapon aloft.

The surprise of the movement stopped Melhorn's lead. The Kid snapped, "You'll hit the girl. You need her too much to kill her. Killing her would mean the law. Let me put her on one side. Throw up your gun and when she's out of range we'll bring our guns down together. I'm giving you that show, Melhorn, because I could kill you

"Bring your hand down, Melhorn," the Kid said. "I'll wait till it's dropping. Then I'll kill you for this, and for Bart Weston."

He gave her a smashing blow in the face that put her out.

while you're killing me across this body."

Slowly Melhorn's hand went high in the air, holding his gun. He watched the Kid with slotted eyes.

"I'm trustin' you," he grunted. "Damn' fools can mostly be trusted."

The Kid grinned while he shoved Letty to one side, flinging her so that she would not run between them.

With an oath now Melhorn dropped his gun hand and sent a bullet through the Kid's shoulder. But the Kid's aim was true. Melhorn slid slowly from his leather, dead when his head dragged the ground.

ROSS TALBOT said, when Letty had been revived with a long swal-

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low of whisky, "You have only to name what pay you want, Mister Coyote Kid. I'll pay it."

Letty went up to the Kid and put her arms around him. "If you don't hate women any more," she whispered, so her father couldn't hear, "Maybe he'll be giving you . . . me."

"I couldn't hate 'em when I wanted to," the Kid grinned. "What luck'll I have not wantin' to?"

Poker Bride

(Continued from page 27)

"Why . . . why Red Butte," he stammered.

"I have never been to Red Butte," she avowed. "Nor have my men." Her eyes narrowed to tiny slits. A blush of rage dyed her face and shoulders. "Wait!" she said. "Is there not a man there named Ferris Tyler?"

"Tyler—yes! What about him?"

"That pig! That twice-damned son of a filthy sow! Many times has that swine blamed my *bandidos* for his crimes."

The horrible truth dawned. Tyler was the kidnaper! That was why Richter had not been returned. That was why he'd been so confident in that poker game. The beast had engineered the whole plot to gain Sheila Richter. Bert hadn't given Ferris Tyler credit for that much cunning.

"I've got to get back!" Nash wailed. "I've got to get back and kill that dirty skunk."

"Si!" she agreed. *"Si."*

Nash became cautious. "Can I trust you?"

"My gun is on the rock. Go get it. We now have the same object."

Nash waded out and crawled to the rock. He got the gun.

A STRANGELY subdued and modest Carlota waded over. She was very careful to keep her shoulders under water. Her eyes were now soft and without madness. She asked: "My shirt please!"

He dropped it to her. She put it on under water. He helped her up. The wet fabric clung to every line of her alluring figure. The tails adhered to her slender thighs. Then she threw her arms about his waist and mashed her wet body hard against him.

"You carry Carlota!" she ordered in a soft voice.

He picked her up. A bare arm went about his neck and she buried her face in the hollow of his throat. Mad lips kissed his neck. A pleasurable shiver swept through his body. Her wet skin was smooth and cool against his arms.

He waded back to the valley. She kept kissing him. It set his heart to pounding. They reached the valley. She directed him to the hut. About fires in the valley moved the shadows of men. Nash determined to humor her. He entered the hut and set her on her feet. A fire blazed in the fireplace.

She looked up at him with an inviting smile. His eyes drank in her young loveliness. Her eyes narrowed; but not with hate. His heart began to race.

"Carlota, very bad!" she reproved herself. "Now she be very nice. You be nice to Carlota and she will give you a fast horse and a note to a *peon* half way to Red Butte who will give you a fresh horse."

She raised her head. He kissed her. Lips strong and moist yielded to his mouth. The arms about his neck were strong. Their bodies melted together. The wet shirt clung skin tight. Those firm little breasts were crushed against his chest with a heart-throbbing pressure. Her slim form was firm yet supple in his arms. He forgot her cruelty, her torture, her madness. Now he thought only of the flaming sweetness of her. She shuddered and went limp against him. Black eyes were bright and challenging. The sound of her labored breathing filled the room.

SHE was true to her promise. But it was midmorning before she let him go. The pinto was fast; the map accurate. Shortly after noon he reached the peon's hut. The man was apologetic and distressed. He had no horse!

Bert Nash was forced to rest his weary mount. And when he resumed his journey he had to let the pinto take a more leisurely gait. The sun lowered. Shadows lengthened. Nash suffered the hell of suspense. But he was too good a plainsman to kill his mount.

Darkness came. Later he saw the lights of Red Butte. Burning with rage he rode to the Richter *hacienda*. When he was a quarter of a mile from the place, a rider appeared from the darkness and confronted him with a raised rifle.

"Better high-tail, stranger! Weddin' here tanight an' nobody's wanted right now."

Nash fumed. But he retreated. Best think things over. With so much at stake he'd better move with care. He dismounted within sight of the house and nursed his wrath. Sheila Richter was going to be forced to mary Ferris Tyler. Evidently the poker game had been played, Tyler had won and Richter returned.

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Later the *patio* became festooned with a myriad lights. The guests began to gather. Nash heard the music and laughter. He mounted. Careful now! He advanced with caution. But the outriders were gone. Tyler evidently considered the wedding beyond stopping now.

The music and merriment ceased. Nash drew closer. Then he saw Sheila step into the *patio* on the arm of her father. She was sheathed in a white satin gown that bared her shoulders and lifted her perfect breasts until they strained against the confining fabric. The skirt hugged her hips, was taut across thighs but from there fell in billowing folds.

She took her place beside the hulking Tyler. The preacher began the service. Nash suffered the agony in indecision. Then he smiled grimly and waited.

When the preacher reached that part of the service wherein he asked if any man could show just cause why. . . . !

Nash spurred the pinto into the *patio* and yelled: "I do!"

STUNNED faces turned to stare at him. Mouths were agape; eyes wide and popping. Tyler turned a deep purple. Sheila exhaled a sigh of relief.

"What'd ya mean?" blustered Tyler. "I won this right an' Richter was returned. Them was the terms."

"I mean," said Nash in an icy, deadly voice, "that Carlota wasn't the kidnaper. She had nothing to do with it. You—Tyler—are the man who kidnaped Richter. Now reach for your irons, Tyler! I'm going to blow you to hell-and-gone."

"I ain't armed," sneered Tyler.

"Then I aim to shoot you for a skunk!" roared Nash and whipped out his .45.

The gun vanished as if by magic and

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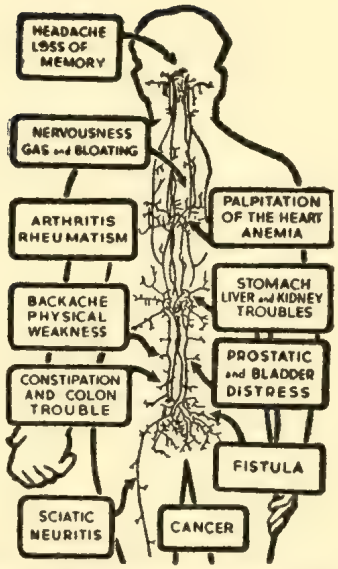

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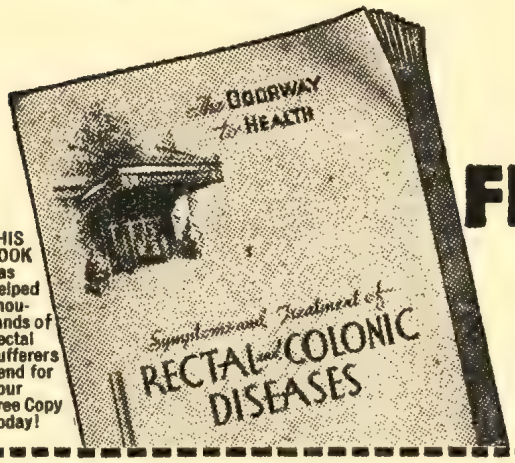

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he heard the report of a rifle. His arm was paralyzed. But he had sense enough to fall off the pinto before the next slug smashed out his brains. He heard Tyler cry out: "Git'm boys!" Then he was fighting against overwhelming odds. He never regained his feet. A club crashed down on his skull.

THE next he knew he was on his feet in a lighted room. He blinked the spots from his eyes and raised his head. Sheila was there. He saw nothing but the woman he loved.

The white gown was split from right armpit to waist and gaped to reveal her delicious breasts almost entirely uncovered. The skirt, too, was in tatters. Her right leg was slightly advanced. A white thigh gleamed with a milky lustre and her lower leg was beautifully slender in sheer, black hose. Her cheek bone was bruised and her eyes were defiant. He stared at her half-revealed breast again. It rose and fell with her enraged breathing.

"Yuh marry us, an' pronto!" snarled Tyler brandishing his .45 at the shaking preacher.

"I can't if she objects," quavered that individual.

"She ain't. If she does, I'll croak her old man."

The defiance faded from Sheila's face. She relaxed in misery and stared at the floor. A shiver of loathing swept through her body. Nash then discovered that his hands were bound. He fought like a demon. A gun butt stunned him to submission. He quieted. Then he saw Mr. Richter. He, too, was tied, and his mouth was gagged.

The preacher, in a cracking voice, began the service.

He'd not gone far when a voice cut the air like a whip lash!

"Ah, *amigos!* A party, si?"

Carlota and six *bandidos*. Tyler and his men made no move. They were covered.

"Who're you?" Tyler blustered. "How'd ya git in?"

Carlota twirled her .45 on an index finger. She laughed.

"I am Carlota, *la bandida,*" she said. "We are here because dead men make poor guards. We will kill them, *señor,* very quietly, with knives." She laughed and drew an index finger across her throat.

Tyler was ashen. His men shaking. Carlota. Carlota turned to Nash. "His skull I crack like the egg," she promised, "and you see it."

"Me see it?" asked Nash in a choked voice.

"*Si!* You I love. I take you home."

"But I don't love you," Nash blurted out in fright.

Her eyes narrowed. Then she turned to Sheila. Hate distorted that dusky face. "Ah," she said, "you he loves." She raised her pistol, aimed it at that milky breast, then lowered the muzzle to the slight swell of her stomach. "I kill you," said Carlota. "He cannot love a dead woman."

"I'll go with you," said Nash very quietly.

But the idea of killing was now an obsession. "Anyway I kill her."

"If you do, I'll kill myself," said Nash.

Carlota laughed. "Then I kill Carlota too." She frowned. "That beautiful breast," she mused.

Sheila was unafraid. She looked at Nash and smiled. She faced Carlota unafraid. Nash fought his bonds. His wrists became cut and bloody.

She raised a foot and raked his face with sharp spurs.

Then came the unexpected!

Tyler went for his gun. He didn't have a chance, for Carlota's men had him covered. But he went for his gun. He'd been thinking. Rather a swift merciful death than hours of agony.

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His hand had no more than seized the butt when four .45s roared tongues of flame. All caught him in the chest. The impact hurled him back against the wall. Blood gushed from his nose and mouth. But he braced his legs.

Carlota wheeled and shot. The slug tore through his neck. He was dead then. But his gun was raised. Carlota threw back her head and laughed. Tyler was dead. But his finger squeezed the trigger.

The slug smashed away Carlota's lower front teeth, mushroomed through the roof of her mouth and tore through the back of her skull. Hair, brains, blood, and splinters of bone peppered the wall. She fell. Tyler had slid down to the floor. There was silence.

THEN a knife sliced Nash's bonds. He reached Sheila in two strides. He did not touch her. He stood two feet away staring into the deep blue of her eyes. Dimly he heard the bodies being taken away. With Carlota dead, the *bandidos* were eager to be off.

"I've been worried sick about you," she said.

"I've been all right," he managed to mumble.

"You haven't," she accused. "You've suffered." She stared at the welt about his forehead.

"Well, mam, reckon I better high tail along."

"Why did you do all this for me?" she demanded.

"Why . . . I . . . ah."

"Why?" she insisted in a more demanding tone.

"Because I love you," he blurted out. "Because I'm crazy as hell about you."

"Then why must you leave?"

"You don't love me," said Nash almost tearfully.

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"You fool!" she whispered, her lips trembling. "You fool! I—do love you. . . . Bert!

Then she was in his arms. Soft, moist lips parted beneath his. His hands touched the sleek expanse of her bare back. He kissed her again and again. The strength of her embrace ripped her gown. He felt weak and giddy. Breathing was an effort.

"Psst!" hissed a voice from the doorway. It was Mr. Richter. He said: "Better get married before the preacher passes out."

"My gown!" shrieked Sheila in confusion.

"Blow out the candles!" suggested her father.

Nash did so. He found her in the dark. His arm circled a supple waist. He took her hand and kissed it, then kissed something nicer than her hand.

They heard the terrified preacher enter. Three times he cleared his voice. The gory events had unnerved him. Twice he began the service only to have his voice fail him.

"Oh, Hell!" he snorted. "I now pronounce you man and wife." He hesitated a moment then added belligerantly: "And the *hombre* that says it ain't legal's a cock-eyed liar!"

Hoodoo Town

(Continued from page 73)

her to her feet. "I'm going to risk it. Them hard hearted jaspers ain't dynamiting that butte till I get Melinda out."

Sally exhaled a long, tremulous sigh. "Darling—I might have figured you'd be a damn' fool—I hate it like snakes, but I sort of am glad you are thataway —ain't never had a honest-to-God man love me before—"

"Compliments ain't helping me none," he reproved. Then, pulling her to him, he kissed her, very gently. "Bye, Sally—"

"I'm going," she said. "To show you the way, so's you won't be kilt. She'll have me to thank for having you."

So that was it. Grimes never could figure what women would do next, and he was weary from trying. So he stealthily picked a course between the sniping posts that girdled the butte.

Once inside the circle whose intermittent sniping was keeping the bandits on edge, Sally took the lead. Slowly, perilously, she worked her way to the very foot of the towering lava formation, which uncounted centuries of rain and wind blown sand had so fantastically chiseled.

Then came the ascent of the seemingly impassable face. Without Sally's guidance, he could never have found that treacherous trail. Half way up, she reached back, fingers closing on his shoulder.

"Can't tell what's coming next," she breathed. "Wait a spell, then trail along and use your head.

No time for questions. She was beyond whispering distance; and the snipers were no longer harassing the besieged. Nothing now but the eerie tricks of the wind to mask his advance.

Someone snarled a low challenge.

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"Now duck," yelled Grimes, pushing the girl away from the line of fire. "Here they come!"

Sally said, "They run me out of camp. I ain't got nowhere else to go. Where's the boss, Walt?"

"Fixing fer to smoke his way out, hosses or no hosses," Walt answered. "C'mere, Sally . . . whut yuh want to see the boss fer?"

Grimes, stealthily ascending, did not get the girl's answer. It was muffled, and she was gasping. And as he rounded an angle of the rock, he could just distinguish her bare legs gleaming through her shredded skirt; the whiteness of her arms, the sway and ripple of her hips

as she pressed closely to the bandit who had pulled her toward him. He hoarsely panted, "Yuh damn' fool, stick with me . . . ef yuh snuck up here through the posse, yuh an' me kin sneak back an' out. Tain't no sense goin' out smoking. . . ."

"Walt," she gasped. "Not yet . . . wait. . . ."

AND wait he did. There was no cry; just a gurgle that Sally's lips stifled before they recoiled in horror. Grimes' knife, sinking hilt deep below Walt's shoulder blade, released a red flood that drooled from the bandit's lips, spattering the girl as he slumped, threshing. Lung and heart lanced by the Bowie knife, he was dead before he dropped.

"Wheah's Melinda?" whispered Grimes, buckling on Walt's pistol belt.

Sally had picked up the red blade, and was wiping it on Walt's shirt front. As they crouched in the shadow of an upthrusting tongue of rock, she brushed aside the remains of her skirt, stretched a garter to the limit, and snapped it back over the heavy blade, securing it high on her plumply rounded thigh, where there was the least chance of its being observed.

"I'll show you," answered Sally.

"Stay here," ordered Grimes. "Jest tell me. . . ."

A woman screamed. The sound was eerily distorted, and so was the harsh laugh of the man who answered. It came from one of the blowholes that honeycombed the butte. Grimes, lunging recklessly into the darkness, heard the muttering voices of desperate men awaiting their leader's order to make a sortie. The hour for the bombing was relentlessly drawing nearer.

"Hi, Walt," hailed a guarded voice from Grimes' right. "What'd the red-

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AUGUST ISSUE ON SALE JUNE 15

head say? How come she's back?"

Sweat cropped out on the boy's tense body as he realized how narrowly the lurking outlaw had missed sensing his comrade's fate. But the treacherous acoustics of the butte had helped: a dying gurgle had sounded like some trick of the wind. Melinda was gasping, somewhere; then she screamed. A man laughed triumphantly, and her cry was cut off.

Grimes turned to his right and snarled in Walt's manner, "Plenty . . . whar's the boss?"

Trigger finger twitching, he crouched, and just caught the blurr of a man's upturned face. If he only had that knife! And then the outlaw countered, "Y'ain't deef, are yuh? Whar yuh think the boss is? Hey. . . ."

But Grimes, diving into the blowhole, had him by the throat. The man was built like a yearling bull, but the boy from Georgia was long and wiry and the sounds that taunted him from somewhere in that tricky darkness whipped him to a slaying fury. Teeth sank into his arm. A knee jabbed him in the pit of his stomach. Then, lurching forward, himself half paralyzed, his weight drove his throttled opponent against the rocks. A dull pop, and the fellow slumped, Grimes across him.

"Quit yore scratchin', yuh hell cat!" raged a voice that drowned Melinda's renewed screams. "Afore we goes out smokin', I'm a-gittin' suthin' fer my trouble . . . ooow. . . ."

Grimes, gritting his teeth, contrived to stir. Then, as that ever-lastingly delayed breath gasped into his lungs, he recovered his gun, smacked it across his unconscious enemy's head, and bounded back to the surface. The next outcry and curse came from directly in front of him.

He did not hear the guttural voices to the rear, the surly, suspicion laden exchange from where he had left Sally; he was too wrathful and desperate to consider that his luck could not continue, that despite the intentness of the outlaws in their watch for some move on the part of the besiegers, he could not hope to carry on undetected. He'd found Melinda, and beyond any doubt, he was too late.

But he had a gun in his hand, and slaying blazed in his heart. He bounced around a rocky knob. A dull red glow marked the opening of a tunnel that reached far into its heart.

By the light of the embers, Grimes saw a tangle of flailing arms and bare legs. Melinda, peeled down to a few scraps of flimsy lingerie, was overwhelmed by a broad shouldered hulk she was clawing in her vain endeavor

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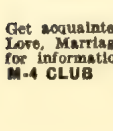

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to keep his bearded lips from her upturned face. He was crushing her to him, subduing her renewed struggles. Grimes' captured six-gun was useless; from where he stood, he could not drive a shot between the ruffian's shoulders. The heavy slug would go through, riddle the girl's writhing body.

"Come up shootin', yo' gol-danged skunk!" yelled Grimes, bounding down the tunnel.

ONE more leap and he'd have his pistol against the bandit's ear; but Melinda, hair streaming and shaking breasts thrusting through the remains of her dress as she wriggled clear, rolled against his shins, breaking his stride. He stumbled, and though his recovery was cat-quick, it gave the girl's assailant his chance. Instead of reaching for the gun belt that lay on the ledge beside him, he lashed out with a heavy hand, snatching Grimes' wrist. The cocked .45 poured lead against the rocks; and jerked off balance, the Skeleton Creek vigilante nosed headlong against his enemy.

Grimes had his hands full. He and Melinda and the outlaw were tangled like a bucket of angle worms; bare, throbbing flesh, streaming hair, clawing paws, desperately kicking boots, all in one hopelessly confused mill. He smashed home once, but the gun barrel glanced, clipping Melinda. A heavy fist hammered his jaw, knocking him groggy.

And then the rumble of voices outside came booming into the cavern. A man shouted, "Jud, you damn' fool . . . the both of you . . . quit fightin' about that gal . . . the posse's fixing to heave dynamite at you. . . ."

"Git on yore laigs!" howled another, dashing in after him.

Grimes, recovering from the blow, wrenched his pistol into line. As he moved, he recognized the first speaker . . . Brynes, mayor of Skeleton Creek, and proprietor of the Corkscrew Inn. And in that deadly instant, he understood why he had an ally in his attempt to stop the bombing; knew that his own try at destroying the dynamite had led the vigilantes to keep an eye on Byrnes, lest his openly expressed sympathy lead him to a like endeavor. He now knew why Brynes had declared open house to celebrate the organization of the vigilantes, getting them drunk enough to give the safe wreckers a head start.

It all flashed through the boy's mind as he thumbed the hammer. Jud, boss of the bandits, heard the warning . . . but he never heard the blast of the pistol that coughed flame and lead into his gaping mouth.

Brynes had had no chance to recognize Grimes. Neither did the men who followed. All they had seen was hand to hand grappling, and a girl whose battered flesh was covered by scarcely more than wisps of lingerie. Her outstretched legs, rounded and luxurious, her full breasts lifted by her indrawn breath, were reason enough for battle. But the blast that spattered blood and brains on Melinda's quivering body got the two into action.

Grimes' weapon shifted, picking the quicker of the two. That was the bandit who had followed Brynes. The guns thundered; the fellow pitched on his face. But the treacherous mayor of Skeleton Creek, knowing now with whom he dealt, had made good use of that instant. Instead of shooting, he leaped, gaining the shelter of a jutting rock just as Grimes' smoke pole roared a second time, its sluggish action making him a split second too late.

And then, as Grimes rolled for cover, a white streak flashed from the tunnel mouth. There was a gleam of steel. Sally, plucking the Bowie knife from her garter, nailed Brynes as he snapped a shot at Grimes. The bullet flattened against the wall. The redhead's skirt had scarcely settled to her knees when the traitor's forward lurch drew her with him; screaming with excitement, she was still desperately tugging at the hilt to withdraw the blade for a second stab.

"He's done!" yelled Grimes, jerking Melinda to her feet. "Now duck . . . here they come . . . a-shootin'!"

THE darkness outside was shaken by pounding feet, confused yells. Grimes, thrusting Melinda into shelter with the redhead, snatched Brynes' fuming pistol and bounded to the tunnel

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AUGUST ISSUE ON SALE JUNE 27th

mouth. But he had half light behind him, and the bandits were in the gloom. They could not yet quite understand; that was his only chance. This was other than a toe to toe shooting, where skill could win.

His gun blazed, sweeping the shadows, its blasts rippling like a rattler's tail. . . .

Then a terrific concussion threw him against the opposite wall. For an instant a hell glare of flame broke the darkness. He felt a mighty rush of air, beating him as with caulking maul; his chest seemed to cave in, his ear drums were at the snapping point. Acrid fumes choked him as he sagged, half conscious, dropping from the wall against which he had been kicked.

Dynamite from the catapult! The vigilantes had sneaked up close enough to use it. Far below, men were yelling. And just outside, men were groaning, dazed and torn and battered; dizzied by the echoes that still mocked them from the blowholes. Grimes, bleeding and numb, scarcely followed what happened. When he tried to crawl to the tunnel mouth his pistol to add to the roar of .45s and the booming of buffalo guns, the whiplash smack of Winchesters, Sally caught his shoulder.

"It's all over, Simon . . . they's cleaned out. . . ."

"Don't shoot!" screamed Melinda, tottering out of the cavern.

They didn't fire; not with her almost bare body silhouetted by the glow of embers behind her. And then the vigilantes of Skeleton Creek holstered their smoking guns, and listened to Grimes' account of his single handed raid.

"I didn't know for sure," Sally cut in, "that Byrnes was teamed up with those jaspers that blew the express safe, an' he was too important a citizen for me to accuse. But that's why I left town

on the first stage, after telling Simon I allowed they was heading for Clovis. I was afraid he might talk out of turn, and if Byrnes didn't murder me, someone might of remembered that me and Lafe Simmons was the only ones that knew Simon had all that money."

Uncle Carter regarded Melinda from head to foot. There was plenty to see, despite her efforts to arrange what remained of her under garments. "I figgered you was crazy, cuttin' up that way about this gal," he said. "But mebbe yuh warn't wrong after all."

WHEN the posse turned from the tunnel, Melinda eyed Sally, saw the redhead's possessive arm about Grimes' neck, and the glance she flashed at Jud, the bandit chief. A flush raced all the way to her breast; then she said, "Simon . . . after seeing what happened . . . you won't want . . . oh, it's my fault . . . I don't blame you. . . ."

"Hush up, honey," said Grimes, very gently. "You couldn't help anythin' that happened. An' ef you was scairt of people's talkin' afore this, mebbe yo' better go on with yo' plans, cause they's goin' to talk plenty from now on." He drew the redhead closer, and added, "Me an' Sally's both lighting a shuck from a hoodooed town. We'uns all needs a fresh start, somewheah else."

Inside Straight

(Continued from page 15)

"All right, you rat! If you won't come out, I'll come in!" and then, leaning over, he hooked the latch of the door with his gun barrel, lifted and pushed. The door swung in with a bang and he threw himself forward on his face right in the opening. Again Streak's gun boomed out, firing at the figure he had expected to see standing silhouetted against the stars.

The bullet parted Chuck's waving hair as he crouched low to the ground and by the gun flash he could see Streak's rage-contorted face snarling at him. With the last remnant of his failing strength, Chuck pulled the trigger on his last bullet. He felt the shock of the recoil travel up his arm, felt the gun slip from his nerveless fingers and drop to the floor. He tried to brace himself for the shock of searching lead when Streak fired again. Instead he heard a choked groan and the thud of a falling body.

Then soft arms were cradling his head, a tear wet cheek was pressed to his. "Oh, Chuck! Chuck darling!" a soft, throbbing voice was whispering . . . and then he heard no more. . . .

CHUCK moved his head slightly to get his eyes out of the sunbeam that peeked through the chink in the cabin wall. His shoulder, tightly bandaged, throbbed but did not actually hurt. He smiled faintly as he watched Lisa, humming softly, sewing the tattered remnants of her dress together so that it would cover her decently. She saw his movement and frowned at him with pretended anger.

"What are you grinning at?" she asked with mock severity.

"You!" he answered.

"Yes?" she said. "Well, laugh this off!" and she threw a blood-stained letter on the bunk beside him. "I found it in-

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side your shirt when I bandaged you last night."

Chuck looked at the letter and flushed slightly. It was the one addressed to the Lonely Hearts Club.

"Oh, I don't think I'll have to bother mailing it," he said sheepishly. Then, his eyes fixed on hers, he started to tear it into little pieces.

Ranch Wife

(Continued from page 93)

pact of a hot iron, his agonized brain saw one chance—

He pitched to the ground. He lay very still. If he was to have any chance at all, it would be by trickery. His wound pained him, but it would not be fatal. The next shot might blast out his life—unless the gunman turned to Sally. He had a fifty-fifty chance.

Jim Draper lay there, face down. He heard the masked man chuckle again, heard Sally's scream, and knew the rough hands had been laid upon her.

Gathering his strength, Jim Draper leaped to his feet, hurtled his big body at the masked man. The latter's gun barked. The shot whizzed by Draper's ear. Then his big cowman's boot caught the other in the stomach, doubled him up. Jim's left fist crashed to his jaw. The masked man crumpled, fell. Jim was upon him like an avenging fury, ripped out of the .45s from his holster just as the masked man aimed the other.

The gun in Draper's hand barked first. The slug cut through the black mask. The masked man pitched forward, and Draper was upon him. He ripped the gun from his grasp, tossed it over his shoulder, tore the mask loose. He gasped. He was looking into the bloody

face of Carlin—his "friend" of years' standing!

Carlin mumbled brokenly through the bloody pulp that had been his face. "I ain't got long, I reckon, Jim. I been a skunk. I admit it. I had men workin' secret on my land—thought I had oil there."

HE coughed. A crimson spume dripped from his lips. "They didn't find it. But right over my boundary line—on *your* land—they did! I tried to scare—you off. You—wouldn't—scare. Then when—Trent tried to—buy you out—I seen a chance to put the blame on him."

He talked gurglingly. "I was playin' for big stakes. I—"

He coughed up blood again. He could say no more. Dave Carlin was dead.

Draper got up. Sally stumbled into his arms. She was sobbing wildly. Jim drew her shivering, half-dressed form close.

"Trouble's all over now, honey," he said softly. "Maybe we own a few more stacks o' chips than we figured on. We can use the extra dinero, I reckon. But gal, I ain't even thinkin' about money right now!" He kissed her gently, kissed her tear-wet eyes until she sighed and her arms went slowly about his neck. She wasn't thinking about money right then, either. . . .

I Can Be Hard

(Continued from page 85)

lap. She had on a filmy negligee that didn't keep the outline of her—nor the color of her skin—from my eyes.

ONE FRENCH WOMAN TELLS ANOTHER

In Europe women are not distressed about abnormal, unnatural periodic delay. They use Dr. Haller's famous Prescriptions, aimed to end most discouraging, over-due, delayed cases, within three days. No longer need modern women be satisfied with old-fashioned pills pills or gelatin capsules that act like a laxative, when what women really want is quick relief from unnatural delay. **WORKS LIKE MAGIC . . . WOMEN SAY** "It sure is wonderful . . .!" A. K., Wis. "I believe it is the only successful treatment on the market," P. C., Calif. "I have used your Prescription 5000 and it worked like a charm. It didn't work until the ampules were used. I didn't think they would work because I tried everything else, but Prescription 5000 sure is wonderful. I was delayed 2½ months," T. M., Calif.

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The train jerked suddenly throwing the girl into my lap.

"Just glad, because of your brother?" I mumbled hoarsely.

"No, not altogether. I—I'm remembering that kiss today."

She laid her head against my chest. Her skin was warm with a rosy flush. I kissed her ears, my breath gasping into them. She turned her face up, lips pouted for kisses, straining against me. The rounded, youthful firmness of her warm breast took my breath away. There was a dazed, beautiful expression on her face. I buried my lips against her throat, felt her pulsating body throb against me. She moaned and locked her arms tighter around my neck.

"Ah!" she sobbed. We had to catch our breath. "Oh, it's so hard—to—to realize what's happened to me. I—I can't explain. So hard to—"

"You don't have to explain things like that, Grace," I mumbled hoarsely.

She caught her lips between perfect white teeth and ignored the negligee that the savagery of our embrace had pulled

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We make this guarantee because of our remarkable success for the last 20 years with this method. We have received testimonials of appreciation from students from all parts of the world. These testimonials reproduced here are only a few of thousands of students who have reported remarkable improvement.

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In the shaded area is shown the tone passage. Lining the walls of this passage are the muscles of the tongue, palate and throat which control the volume and strength of the voice.

"People who used to laugh at me because I stammered are the ones I can laugh at now . . . thanks to you and your course," says Samuel Bryson of Chadron, Texas. . . . .

O. M. Rennie says, "I had a very poor voice, always nervous and short of breath . . . that is gone now. I am only a student, yet I could stop right now and still be repaid 100%".

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every way. Mostly open!

"Did you get your reward, Hard Guy?" she murmured. She held her lips to mine as she spoke. Boy, man, and sailor! does that do things to a guy?

"Not yet," I kissed-talked back.

She snuggled, still with her lips on mine.

"Hard Guy. I'm sooo excited. I—I'd be afraid to stay alone, now . . ."

I picked the whole delicious, throbbing, ecstatic bundle of her up off my lap into my arms.

"Don't worry, sugar," I assured. "You won't!"

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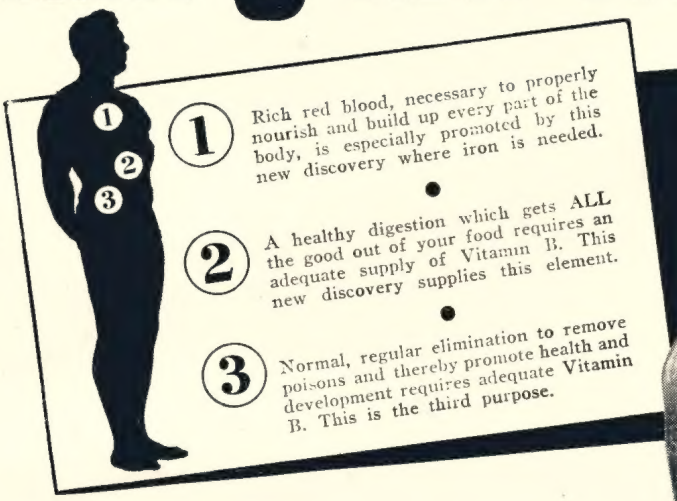
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IN CREATING man, nature provided a structure of bone and muscle as a means of general support. BUT . . . the abdomen, which holds the delicate internal organs, was made without the benefit of bone . . . *dependent solely upon muscle tension for proper support.*

This muscle wall is actually an *abdominal belt* of living muscle tissue. As one grows older, this living muscle belt deteriorates, loses the necessary strength to support, causes abdominal Ptosis. This unhappy condition is especially prevalent in men past thirty-five. *Whether stout or thin,* sagging stomach organs may be dragging you down. It is the basic cause of many common every-day ailments.

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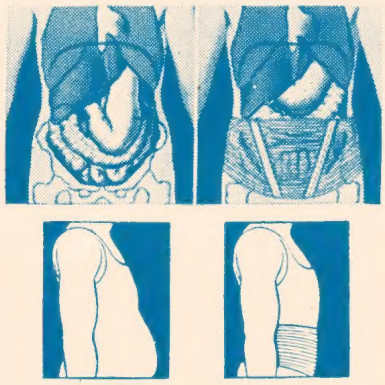

PROPER SUPPORT
The DIRECTOR Way

In many men, the abdominal supporting muscles eventually give way. Then trouble starts. Delicate internal organs sag to the pelvic region . . . gradually lose their efficiency and fail to function properly. The x-ray illustration to the left shows this unwholesome condition. Note the dropped organs . . . a condition known to the medical profession as Ptosis. By wearing a Director Belt, this condition can often be corrected. In such cases, Director brings results as shown in x-ray illustration to the right.

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"Restored Pep and Vitality"

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DIRECTOR UPLIFTS THE STOMACH IN a *Natural* and *Normal* WAY

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Proper support permits full natural breathing. Internal digestive processes again work efficiently . . . uncramped yet comfortably supported. Truly, Director has lifted thousands to better health and smaller waistlines.

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Director supports the lower spine *without* confining it. Director has no hooks, laces or fasteners in back . . . its special controlled-elastic permits free movement everywhere . . . at the *abdomen* and at the spine. Having no "dead" sections, it supports surely but comfortably. It's an exclusive Director feature.

Insurance companies consider a protruding stomach detrimental to long life. A distended, sagging abdomen mars your appearance, threatens your health, and curtails your activity. Thousands report they have regained former vitality and trimness of figure. It is easy. This FREE-to-YOU, vest pocket size—16-page folder explains Director System fully and completely. Send for it Today—it costs you nothing.

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